

# Tainted Spirit: Part One

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## VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete



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# **Tainted Spirit: Part One**

**VraieEsprit**

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# Summary

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## Description

10 years ago Azusa helped seal an evil mage in a tower on planet Yousai. Now she seeks freedom, and as Sasami arrives on Yousai, Tsunami becomes a target. Meanwhile Ryoko's darkest foe has been released and he is determined to take his revenge!

FINISHED

# Chapter 1

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## Introduction and Disclaimer

So I was talking to a friend of mine over MSN the other day, and we got to talking about fanfic and characters pulled into my extremely AU world of Tenchi that keeps veering off in new and frightening directions. The idea had already been jokingly brought up to me that if I continued like this, I'd have Pretty Sammy and Mahou Shoujo characters invading my stories as well... and I mentioned this to my friend on MSN. He categorically raised the challenge of doing it — to bring Pretty Sammy characters into my Tenchi world without making it look like a circus show — and I *always* like a challenge.

So this story was born.

If you are not familiar with the Pretty Sammy OVA or Magical Project S, I don't think it really matters too much either way. There are certain characters from that continuity which will appear in this story arc — namely Ramia, Rumiya, Romio and Misao/Pixy Misa — but their appearance is not necessarily going to be true to their original series canon. As with some of the other characters imported into my TU-based world, they have undergone modifications to fit the scene. There will also be no (I repeat, absolutely NO) Pretty Sammy. Sasami will be involved, and so will Tsunami. But I think she already has enough on her plate without donning a dodgy skirt and waving a plastic baton around. So although this story involves Pretty Sammy characters, it is not (repeat, NOT) a Pretty Sammy fic.

The other thing this story does is re-introduce a character from an earlier story I wrote, on account of two things. One, I got asked if he'd ever re-appear, and two, he seemed to fit what this story needed. I won't mention him by name, although you'll find out fairly early on just who I mean!

I think, from the rough notes I have so far, that this might be a long story. Possibly even into three parts. It still involves my butchered Jurai royal family, and is based on a Tenchi x Ryoko foundation set within the confines of the Tenchi Universe world. There will be quite a lot of Tenchi and Ryoko in this story, I should imagine, considering what I have so far. There will also be some time spent on the Earth, as a semi-compromise to those people keen on seeing more Earth-based action (my reason for keeping away from the Earth so much as I do is

because I am not confident representing Japan in a correct cultural manner and I really don't like fudging what I don't wholly understand. It's not because of any latent hatred towards the Earth!)

That said, on with the show. Usual legalities apply — happy reading!

### **Synopsis**

*Ten Juraian Years have passed since the Lord of Yousai confined his traitorous wife to a stone prison, sealing her and her dark arts inside with the help of Azusa, then Prince of Jurai and his special Tsunami-given magic. The battle cost the Lord his life, but brought peace to Yousai as his small daughter grew and flourished in the gentle care of her Council guardians.*

*Now, however, the young heiress has come of age, reaching her thirteenth summer, and suddenly the tendrils of a dark plan begin to slide into motion. From deep within her prison, the Arian-born Lady of Yousai still yearns to take control of the planet and exact revenge on those who imprisoned her. As she casts her spells and weaves her curses over the lives of those around her, she plots to release a powerful ally from his black-stone confinement — someone who will kill without compunction and who may be the only one strong enough to properly set her free.*

*Into this chaos comes Sasami, eager and excited about her first Progress as Tsunami's representative. Yousai's Council hope that the Princess's arrival will enable their shrines to be purified and their land to be blessed in anticipation of the young heiress's coronation — but not all is as peaceful as it seems. Meanwhile, on the Earth, Ryoko is troubled by the shadow of a dark ship who seems to haunt the horizon. Are Ryo Ohki's sensors really right? Could it be that her old foe has broken his shackles and come for her, after all?*

**TAINTED SPIRIT: PART ONE**  
**A Tenchi Muyo! FANFICTION**  
**by**  
**VRAIEESPRIT**

**Chapter One**  
***The Planet Yousai***  
***Ten Jurai Years Earlier.***

*They were gaining on her.*

*Breathless and panicked, the young woman flitted through the maze of corridors that made up the Court Hall, diving from doorway to open doorway as she sought to lose the guardsmen on her tail. At the tips of her*

fingers, flickers of light danced, glowing into flame as she ran, but she paid it no heed, knowing that whatever her own fate, she had a message to convey and a warning to pass on.

At length the noise of the men behind her faded into the distance and, heartened by the ground she had claimed, she found her second wind, darting across the final hallway and pounding on the door of the end chamber, waiting impatiently to be given admittance. It wasn't long before the door swung open, although to the frightened young woman it seemed like forever, and she came face to face with the object of her search, relief flooding her features as she realised she had made it in time.

The woman eyed her for a moment, then stood back from the door, allowing her servant to tumble forward onto the carpet before locking and bolting the wooden divide behind them. Only then did she turn on her companion, eyes sparking with anticipation and curiosity.

"Well?" She demanded softly. "Speak, Romio. What do you have to tell me, about my Lord Husband's decision?"

"My Lady, his men come. You must flee this place and soon!" Romio drew ragged breaths into her tortured lungs, raising her gaze earnestly to her companion. "He has sought Imperial assistance, and they are in great numbers even now. They come to find you and take you from the palace — I heard my Lord Master say so with his own words. He has already sealed away your honoured daughter, so as to prevent her from witnessing anything that should come to pass. You must escape this place now, before it's too late!"

"I see." The woman's eyes became cold, their usually vibrant marigold sheen clouded as she seemed to contemplate the woman's words. Standing there, Romio thought absently, framed by the failing light of the sun that glimmered through the glass window, her mistress looked more forbidding than ever. Fine robes crafted from the most expensive and delicate of fabrics flowed off the curves of her body as if purposefully designed to add grace to her bearing, announcing to all who saw her that this was a lady of some status and breeding. Her silken waves of hair, vivid ruby in hue, were caught up behind her face in a traditional manner, wisps of it framing her face and giving her a look of deceptive peace and beauty. Around her throat she wore several chains of beads, each bearing symbols that Romio did not understand, but that she knew were a matter of religious significance to her exotic, enigmatic mistress. Although she was clad in the fashionable style of a lady of Yousai, there was something distinctly foreign and mystical in her bearing, and it was well known that her fair skin and blemish-free complexion were the envy of whole Court. And yet, despite her beauty, there was often a hardness in the woman's golden eyes which told



those who knew her that she was not someone to be easily trifled with.

There was a long silence, and Romio felt the tension in the chamber rise, as she heard the faint sound of men approaching the Lady's chamber. Fear flashed into her eyes, but at the noise, the Lady began to laugh, amusement clear on her pretty face. Romio stared at her in confusion. Had she finally lost her mind? Was the stress of the situation finally causing her mistress to crack?

"Lady Ramia? Is something amiss?"

"Well, Romio, so it's an interesting game we choose to play." Ramia inclined her head slightly, moving across to her dresser where an ornately carved box stood in pride of place, flanked on each side by golden candles. One of these flames had been lit, and the faint scent of perfumed incense pervaded the chamber, the smoke hanging heavy in the air as Romio followed her mistress's movements with an eagle eye. Ramia did not seem in a hurry, she decided, and not for the first time she wondered what the strange box contained, that even in her time of peril, Ramia was drawn to it more than she was to escaping certain danger.

"Lady Ramia, are you not going to leave?" She demanded. Ramia turned, eying her in surprise.

"Should I?" She asked. "Do you think I should fear them, Romio? You are a fool. More of a fool than I imagined you were... do you think that they can hurt me?"

"My Lady?"

Anything else Romio had been on the verge of saying died in an instant, as she registered a strange flash of light flicker across Ramia's beautiful golden eyes. Despite herself she swallowed hard, shrinking back from her mistress's wrath as Ramia drew her hands together, prickling light dancing from one end of her arm to the other as she eyed her prey contemplatively.

"I am not afraid of them." She said softly. "You look surprised, Romio — even frightened. You know I am a witch, don't you? A sorceress. Well, we prefer mage, where I come from — but you are aware of this fact, aren't you? You should have more faith in your mistress — after all, you have been sworn in blood to serve me. You should expect me to be ready for all things."

"Lady Ramia, forgive me." Romio bowed her head, and Ramia chuckled, her cold laughter echoing around the chamber and sending chills up Romio's spine.

"You know plenty about me, in fact, Romio-san." She murmured, the light fading away as she came to rest her hand on her companion's

shoulder. "Too much, maybe. After all, when a servant knows too much, it's possible that they can let... little details... slip out."

Romio raised eyes to her companion's in horror, and slowly Ramia nodded.

"You don't keep secrets from me very well." She said lightly. "Your blood is mine to control, and I read your thoughts and your panic as easily as if I were inside of your head. Yes, Romio, I know that you have betrayed me. That you have spoken in some detail to my husband's people about the dark arts you believe I possess. It was a foolish choice, was it not? You clearly have no idea of his magic compared with mine. Do you expect that a mere Shizukasari Lord — a puppet of Jurai's King — would be able to adequately subdue someone like me?"

"L... L... Lady Ramia, I..."

"Save it." Ramia pushed her carelessly backwards, and Romio scrambled to regain her balance, staring up at the lady with frightened eyes. "I don't wish to hear your excuses. I do not reward betrayal, Romio, and I rarely allow anyone the chance to cross me twice. Did you think that you were any different? That because your blood is bound to me, I would let you escape with your life?"

"Lady Ramia, please! I... I didn't mean to! They made me... the truth serum..." Tears spilled down Romio's cheeks as she grasped at her companion's wrists. "Please, believe me. I would never betray you — not willingly! But the serum is strong and I am weak. Lord Azusa's men came from Jurai and they are supporting your husband... I wasn't able to hold back their questions. I am nothing compared to you — I have no magic that will protect me from their probing. I have failed you, I know that — but I did not mean to! Please, spare my life!"

Ramia eyed her companion coolly, gazing over her huddled form as she did so. Then she shrugged, turning back to the table and resting her hands on the ornate box.

"They are almost at the door." She whispered. "Be a good girl, Romio, and let them in."

"L... Lady Ramia?" Romio eyed her uncertainly, unsure as to whether the gentle command was a reprieve or the first warning of a snare. She stumbled hesitantly to her feet, gazing at Ramia for a moment. "Is that what... what my Lady wills me to do?"

"Open the door. Let them see me, in all my glory." Ramia said simply, gesturing towards the door as Romio heard the clatter of footsteps and the loud thud of swords and armour against the wood door. Any minute now,

she knew, someone would give the order to fire, and powerful weapons would break down the divide between them, rendering any chance of escape an impossibility. Fear choked her, but she forced it back down, reaching for the door-latch with a trembling hand.

She did not see Ramia open her box, nor did she see the lady's slender fingers slip lovingly inside, extracting two small objects from the silk-lined surface and tucking them into the folds of her gown. As the servant's fingers closed around the door handle, she did not see Ramia's own digits curl gently around one of the objects, cupping it in her hand as the door began to swing back.

As the guardsmen bore down on them, Romio suddenly became aware of a paralysing, stifling pain that shot through her spine, racing up her body from her brain to the base of her back and she tumbled to the floor, opening her mouth to cry out as she fell out of the guard's line of fire. Her vocal chords refused to respond, however, and she gasped like a landed fish, struggling against the strange force that held her body in its power. A flash of terror washed through her as she realised the cause of the malady, and with all her strength she managed to shift her head around just enough to see the amused, interested expression on her mistress's face. As they met gazes, Ramia offered her a smile, removing her fingers just enough so that Romio could see the item she had clutched in her hand. It was glowing with a sinister reddish energy, and Romio's heart spasmed in her chest at the sight of it, knowing all too well now that her mistress had not been in a forgiving mood. Foam licked at the corners of her mouth as her panic intensified, and yet still she was unable to move or speak, struck to the ground as two well-uniformed men entered the chamber proper, one holding out his hands to the Lady Ramia.

"My Lady, we have orders to remove you from this place." He said softly. "Will you please accompany us... your Lord Husband has business he wishes to discuss with you of a most urgent nature."

"Business which requires the invasion of my privacy?" Ramia raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow, tut-tutting under her breath. "Is such intrusion necessary?"

Romio attempted to reach out a hand to grab the guard's leg, but it was to no avail, and with a sudden stab of horror she realised that none of them could see her — that help was mere inches away from her fingertips, and yet she was completely unable to reach it. The glow around Ramia's object intensified, and Romio gasped as fire shot through her once more, causing her fingers to tremble and drop away from the guard's uniform. The man acted as if nothing had happened, completely oblivious of the struggling form of the young woman as she fought desperately for her life.

*“If you will, my lady. Come this way.”*

*The second guard spoke soberly, and Ramia let out a heavy sigh, nodding her head.*

*“Very well. I will attend my Lord Husband on the matters that disturb him.” She said quietly. “Lead the way, men. I will come without resistance.”*

*With that she swept out of the room, giving the guards no chance to do as she was bidden as she headed purposefully down the hall and away from the elaborately decorated chamber.*

*As she did so, she released something from her grasp, and as the small object made contact with the floor, Romio felt pain wash through her body, as if she had been battered against a hard surface. She closed her eyes, almost wishing herself dead in that instant, and hating the fact that wherever she was being taken, Ramia would still be able to reach her and her frightened, desperate thoughts. Soon, she knew, the stifling energy would suffocate her completely, and she felt her heart falter in her chest as the pressure began to creep across the whole of her body.*

*“Are you hurt?”*

*The voice startled her and she gazed up, surprise in her expression as she took in the features of a man some decades older than her, with long thick hair tied back from his face with ornate imperial clasps. His chin was covered by a beard, making him appear older at first glance, but as he held out a gentle hand to take hers, she realised that he was probably no older than his late forties. At her surprise, his eyes flickered with warm compassion and slowly he lifted her up, resting his arm behind her back as she struggled to draw breath into shaken lungs.*

*“You could see me.” She gasped. “And... and I can move. What... but... Lady...”*

*She faltered, and the man eyed her gravely, resting a hand on her shoulder.*

*“You are Romio, aren’t you?” He asked quietly. “Lady Ramia’s servant.”*

*Slowly and stiffly, Romio nodded her head.*

*“You gave evidence to your Lord Master, and she sought to avenge herself for it, I imagine.” The man seemed troubled as he hauled her to her feet. “You are not safe here, my dear. You must leave at once — come with me. Your Lady Ramia will not roam these chambers again, but even so, while you stay on this world your life may yet be in danger. Will you*

trust me to aid you?"

"Lady Ramia has my soul in her hands." Romio managed. "She has done, ever since I... I was a young girl. She took me in when I was an orphan, and she healed me when I was attacked by the thieves who killed my family. I owed her everything, even my life. I did not want to betray her, My Lord. But in the end, perhaps I deserved her justice."

The man frowned, reaching down to pick up the object that Ramia had so carelessly tossed from her hand. He eyed it for a moment, then held it out, and Romio took it gingerly, turning it over in her hands. A tiny rendition of her own form stared back at her, bead eyes glinting in the dying sunlight, and despite herself she felt a chill flicker down her spine. Resisting the urge to crush the figure, she raised frightened eyes to her companion, who nodded his head.

"Ramia-sama always intended to kill you, child. She just toyed with you until she could pick her chance." He said softly. "Your loyalty has long since been misplaced. But she won't hurt you any longer. Fortunately for you, Ramia-sama's magic is not the only force in existence in these parts... and I was able to see your distress and break the spell she had over you. The doll is powerless over your soul now — whatever hold she had over your heart and mind, she no longer has."

"My Lord, why are you helping me? What use can I be to you?" Romio asked hesitantly, as her companion removed his own cloak from his shoulders, wrapping it around her shaking form as he led her towards the door of the chamber. "I'm just an ordinary serving girl — nothing more than that. I have no money, nothing to offer you. I... I don't understand why you'd care if I lived or not. I was Lady Ramia's servant — not somebody important."

The man paused, eying her for a moment. Then he smiled, holding out his hands in a gesture of peace.

"My name is Azusa, Crown Prince of Jurai." He said quietly. "I am here on my Father the Emperor's orders, to ensure peace returns to this world of intrigue and closet civil war. Lady Ramia's threat must be diminished if Yousai is ever to be a thriving world again. That is why I am here. And I will take you to Jurai. The magic of Tsunami protected you today, my child. It will protect you always from her ill will, if you return with me aboard my ship."

"Azusa-sama..." Romio's eyes opened wide with fear and comprehension and she dropped her head in a bow before him. "I'm sorry — I must seem so rude, my Lord, but I really did not..."

"Shh." Azusa shook his head. "Come with me."

*“But how will I repay you for your kindness to me? I told you, I have no money.”*

*“I want nothing from you in return. Your mistress has killed enough people with her dark magic and I did not wish to stand by and let another fall.” Azusa said gently.*

*“There must be something I can do, though? Some service I can perform, however small?” Romio raised fervent red eyes to his, and the Prince smiled, nodding his head.*

*“It would be of great help to me and to my people, if you would share with us as much information as you can about Lady Ramia and her magic.” He admitted. “Since she tried to kill you, I believe your service to her is at an end. Will you undertake that task, instead?”*

*Romio hesitated for a moment, glancing down at her hands. Then, slowly, she nodded.*

*“I will.” She murmured. “But Lady Ramia is more powerful than many people realise. You should not risk her wrath, Lord Azusa. She used only a little of her magic on me, because I am not worthy of her wider attentions. But whatever you do, even if you kill her, you will not be able to stop her. She is of Airai. Those who cannot easily be killed. And she will remember this grudge.”*

*“Many people have grudges against Jurai, but few are strong enough to act on them when it comes to facing Tsunami’s magic.” Azusa said composedly. “And besides, it will be no concern of yours, now. You simply tell me what you know, and that will be all you need to do. Leave the rest to us — Lady Ramia will never be able to terrorise your world again.”*

## Chapter 2

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### Chapter Two *The Corners Of Sub-Space* *The Present Day*

So this was truly the place he had been seeking.

The young boy stifled a shiver, pulling himself more carefully through the cracks and crevasses of the abandoned space station as he watched the stars idly gleaming outside the window. He had spent what seemed like forever, coursing through space based only on a hunch and a whim, but even though it was bleak and miserable alone in the darkness, he knew that going home empty-handed would be even more terrifying.

He had come with a reason, after all.

He glanced down at his hands, turning over the neat chain of beads that were looped over his calloused fingers. Each one bore a symbol, he remembered, and every symbol had it's own particular significance. This particular chain bore three symbols, and he ran his fingers over each in turn. Freedom. Fidelity. Life.

“I don’t know how one little necklace is going to do all the things she says it will, but I’m not going to argue with Lady Ramia.” He murmured, clutching the chain more tightly in his hands as he moved towards his destination — the powerful computer that had once provided energy for the whole of the empty wreckage. “This should have enough power to do the things she hopes — I just hope she knows what she’s doing. That’s all. This isn’t a game any more, and she might be safely locked away on Yousai, but this could very well kill me and I really don’t want to die all alone up here with noone ever knowing. Not that anyone would really care, if I died — but there are kinder resting places than this.”

He faltered for a moment, then gathered himself, resolution hardening inside of his heart as he reached the computer console. He knew little about technology, and even less about magic, but Ramia had given him explicit instructions and with gritted teeth he began to carry them out to the letter, fumbling in his bag for the odd golden powder that the lady had given him only that morning. Carefully he sprinkled the dusty substance across the main control panel, watching with wary anticipation as the screen flickered into life before him. An

eerie glow surrounded the device as the monitor hummed and flickered, the pixels on the screen drawing back to reveal a great darkness beyond.

The boy stifled another shiver, then pulled himself up onto the top of the console, his fingers blurring and morphing into long, delicate feathers as he shifted his form, spreading his newly moulded wings and scooping up the beaded chain in his beak as he flew directly towards the blackness. At first he thought he might collide with the monitor itself, but the glass had given way to strange black space and as he surged deeper into the void, he realised that it was becoming ever colder.

So this was what subspace looked like.

As he glanced around him, trying his best not to panic at the bleakness that engulfed every corner, he focused his mind on the object of his search. There were no stars here to light his way, and even with the sharp vision of his night-bird form he found it difficult to distinguish looming shadows in the dark until he was almost right on top of them. There was a strange stillness to everything, and inwardly the boy wondered how such a place could even exist alongside the normal world, so empty was it of life and movement.

At length he found what he was looking for, as a strange blueish white glow flickered out of the gloom. He approached the mass cautiously, able to make out the shape of a spacecraft hidden deep within the whirlpool of magic, and he narrowed his eyes, sensing that the spell that held the ship in stasis was formed from strong, decided magic. Clutching the beads more tightly in his beak, he drove through the epicentre of the barrier, closing his eyes as the energy prickled faintly against his wings, and relief flooded through him as he realised he had reached the middle unharmed.

“Ramia-sama was not lying.” He mused to himself, hovering above the battered form of a spaceship as he reflected on his next move. “The charm she cast over my feathers do allow me to move easily through time, space and spells created by powerful enemies. No wonder she chose me to be her eyes and ears on a mission such as this. In this form, I cannot easily be wounded... in this form, I can carry out her bidding and return to Yousai alive. Perhaps she cares more than I thought about my fate — at least it seems she doesn’t intend me to die up here.”

He drew nearer to the dark hull of the ship, flexing the tips of his wings as he scoured the craft for a way in. At length he found a small gap between the main doors and the cargo deck, and he slipped



through the narrow opening, almost managing to spill the beads from his beak as he struggled to get through. He cursed under his breath, pausing to calm his shaken nerves for a moment before flying resolutely into the belly of the craft, following the distinctive scent of pervading blood and death to the central control room.

He winced, his eyes watering as the stench of decay became overpowering, and for a moment he hesitated in the doorway of the drive-room, half-expecting to find the dead bodies of several former pirates littering the floor.

And yet there was nothing. No sign of any bodies, or bones, or even remains. A few dark stains on the floor suggested that it had been the scene of great battles in the past, but it seemed that whoever had last fought aboard the ship had escaped with their lives.

Confused, the boy fluttered around the chamber a couple of times, as if searching for the source of the scent. As he did so, his sharp eyes caught sight of another object and he drew breath sharply into his lungs, dropping down towards it as he registered what it was.

“The man cast in stone by Juraian magic.” He whispered, taking in the deformed features of the figure with an element of revulsion. “This is the being Ramia-sama sent me to enslave. I will not fail her in this — although by the smell of this place, he is already many years dead. Arian magic may be strong, but can it really bring a corpse back to life after so long rotting in this hell?”

He sighed, flickering the tips of his wings as he carefully draped the beaded chain around the statue’s neck.

“Oh well. Mine is not to question Lady Ramia’s wisdom. Only to carry out her instructions. If she believes in the power of this magic, then I will not be the one to object.”

He loosed his grip on the beads, and at first nothing happened, but then, just as he was about to give up on his task, a faint amber light began to flicker and glow around the form of the man, extending out across the drive room of the craft and touching the edges of the ship’s battered control panel with flaring tongues of light. Just in time, the boy dragged his bird form back out of the way as the magic intensified and slowly, deep within the crystal cocoon, something began to stir. As he watched, transfixed, the image of a human being began to emerge from the blackness, the crystal shattering and dropping in shards to the floor as the creature stretched and struggled to stand, drawing breath into dusty lungs as he gained an awareness of his surroundings. As he did so, the lights on the spacecraft’s control

panel began to dance into life, and for the first time the bird-boy was aware of the dim hum of engines, somewhere below them.

“Ramia-sama.” He murmured, bowing his head slightly in deference to his mistress’s power. “You are truly a miracle worker.”

“Ry... o... ko.”

The voice was gravelly and hoarse, and without warning a hand shot out of the amber haze, catching the boy off guard and grabbing him tightly around the throat. “Where..is... Ryoko!”

“Let me go!” The boy-bird flapped his wings fiercely against the man’s scarred, weatherbeaten skin and as his feathers made contact with the other’s arm the man roared in anger, his grip loosing.

“You are the Space Pirate Haki.” The boy hovered out of his companion’s grasp, gazing down on him with a mixture of fear and derision as he watched the half-risen form stumble around the cockpit of his ship, memories and thoughts returning to him in bits and pieces as his coordination improved. “You were sealed in subspace by the magic of a planet called Jurai. Now my mistress, the Lady Ramia, seeks your help in mutual vengeance against this world. She has freed you from your curse — will you help her in defeating your foes?”

“*Where is Ryoko!*” The man’s voice thundered across the drive room, as glinting ice-blue eyes glared up into the darkness. “Come down here and answer my question. Where is the woman who did this to me! I will see her dead... I will see them all dead!”

“I’ll take that as a yes, then.” The bird-boy fluttered his wings, safe in the knowledge that Ramia’s magic had protected him once and would likely do so again. “My name is Rumiya, and Lady Ramia wishes me to inform you of her desires as soon as possible.”

“I don’t care anything for your Lady Ramia, unless I can slit her throat from chin to chest.” The eyes glinted again, and Rumiya saw Haki’s fists clench in the darkness. “I do not work for anyone. I am Haki! I do not cower to other people’s power!”

“In that case, I’ll remove Ramia-sama’s charm and you will return to your imprisoned state.” Rumiya said flatly, swooping down to peck at the beads that lined the pirate’s throat. “You are still sealed under their magic — Ramia-sama’s beads are the only thing allowing you to walk and speak and think once again. She — and I — can guide you from this place, because she has need of your aid. When you have served her purpose, you will be free to serve your own. But until then, you are only alive by will of my Lady’s power. If you wish to be sealed

again, just give the word. I can remove this just as easily as I placed it.”

“Why you...” Haki’s fist came out again, smashing into the control panel of the ship as Rumiya darted neatly out of the way of his blow. The contact seemed to cause the pirate pain, as red lights flared across the ship’s dashboard and Rumiya started, staring from one to the other with new eyes.

“Ramia-sama was right. You and your ship do think with one mind.” He murmured softly.

“Karasu and I are demons of space... we are pirates and we show noone any mercy.” Haki growled. “Come down here, bird, and let me rip your scrawny head off. I don’t know why you came to me, but I am strong enough to survive without the dabbling of some witch and her cockateel.”

“I am not a cockateel.” Rumiya was offended. “I am Lady Ramia’s page and servant, and I take whatever form I choose to take. We are still deep in subspace, and I alone know the way out. Lady Ramia is not someone you wish to antagonise... if you want to take your revenge against Jurai, then you would do as well to work with her rather than against her.”

Haki was silent for a moment, eyes glittering from within his scarred visage as he contemplated his companion’s words. Then, at length, his gaze narrowed.

“*Nobody* will prevent me from slaying that bitch Ryoko and her allies.” He said grimly. “Your Lady Ramia had better not get in my way, because I will not rest until they are *all* dead.”

“That’s really not my concern. I’m just ordered to get you out of here and to make you known exactly what my mistress requires of you.” Rumiya said acidly. “Are you done with your posturing? Because if so, this place is cold and you won’t fully revive yourself until we leave it.”

“Then maybe I’ll wring your neck, bird boy.”

“Not unless you want to be burnt by Ramia-sama’s magic.” Rumiya flicked his wings tauntingly. “In this form, you cannot lay a hand on me. I have her protection. So may you have, if you choose to do her bidding. After all, you are a pirate. I’m sure that what she has in mind for you will be right up your street...”

“You know, you weren’t kidding when you said that the most

beautiful beach was a stone's throw from Kurashiki."

Sakura Ito settled herself on the expansive beach towel, slipping her hands behind her head as she cast a glance at her companions, amusement sparkling in her dark eyes. "Tenchi, you should have told us about this place sooner. Nothing beats a summer by the sea, after all."

"Well, this trip is a bit more special than just a trip to the sea." Tenchi Masaki drew his knees up to his chest, turning his gaze out towards the ocean, where he could just about make out the figure of his fiancée against the bright sunlight. "This is in honour of Ryoko's birthday, that's all. We don't have Startica on this planet, but I found out from Washu exactly when it fell in the calendar. It's the first time Ryoko's ever been able to celebrate a birthday — so this whole weekend is really because of that."

"She doesn't seem to be complaining." The final member of the trio, Hiroshi Ikeda adjusted his sunglasses, dropping down on the towel at Sakura's feet as he sent splashes of water and wet sand all over her legs. "Whoops. Sorry, Ito-san. Wasn't looking where I was treading."

"Ikeda!" Sakura put her hands on her hips, glaring at him. "You're such a moron sometimes, you know that? What are you doing, anyway? I thought you were swimming in the sea."

"I was, but male pride can only take being lapped by a woman so many times." Hiroshi said ruefully, and Tenchi grinned.

"Ryoko's a pretty strong swimmer." He acknowledged. "But I think you can keep your pride intact, Ikeda-kun. You weren't exactly racing against your average woman."

"It seems so odd, somehow, that last Thursday should have been her first birthday." Sakura reflected, as she watched the pirate dive beneath the waves, followed close behind by a small bundle of chocolate fur as Ryo Ohki plunged into the depths alongside her. "She's really never celebrated her age before?"

"She's never known until now when her birthday actually was." Tenchi shook his head. "So no. This is the first time. I'm glad you guys came down from Osaka to join the party — I think she's getting kind of fond of you both, and it's nice for her to have Earth friends too. It's not been an easy transition in some respects, settling on this planet when people are still adjusting to the idea of alien communication. I'm glad you both came around to her. She's really not so bad, once you get to know her."

“She’s possibly the most scary woman I’ve ever met.” Hiroshi pursed his lips. “But I think I mean that in a good way.”

“Hey, aren’t you weaklings coming into the water? It’s not that cold!” Before anyone could respond, the pirate herself materialised at the edge of Sakura’s towel, making Hiroshi visibly jump and tumble back on top of his friend. Ryoko let out an amused peal of laughter as Sakura shrieked, struggling to shunt herself away from the falling student’s dripping, sandy body.

“Well, Ikeda, and I didn’t know you had it in you.” The pirate teased. “So? Are none of you wusses coming to swim? It’s beautiful in the sea, and Ryo Ohki and I will make sure none of you get eaten by rogue jellyfish.”

“It might be safer with the jellyfish, than here with Ikeda.” Sakura scrambled to her feet, shooting the embarrassed Hiroshi a pointed glare. “And it is hot here, on the sand. Maybe a dip in the sea wouldn’t hurt — Tenchi-kun, are you coming with us?”

“I’ll sit this one out. I know what swimming with Ryoko usually entails.” Tenchi said dryly, and Ryoko flashed him an innocent look.

“What? I don’t do anything bad... Tenchi, what are you trying to say about me?”

“More likely he’s just excusing himself so he can enjoy the view.” Hiroshi said teasingly, patting his friend on the back. “Right, Masaki?”

“The... view?” Tenchi stared at him, and Hiroshi rolled his eyes.

“Your fiancée is running up and down the beach in a bikini which probably should be banned on account of its lack of fabric, and you look completely non-plussed?” He demanded. “What in hell is wrong with you, Masaki?! I swear, sometimes you’re the densest guy on this Earth. I don’t know about alien connections, but I think they did something to your brain!”

“Oh.” Tenchi flushed red, looking sheepish, and Ryoko chuckled, reaching down to ruffle her fingers affectionately through his dark hair.

“Tenchi’s just a gentleman.” She said playfully. “Unlike others I could mention. Are *you* enjoying the view, Ikeda-san?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Hiroshi’s eyes sparkled with humour. “Stop stirring it, Ryoko... Masaki’s my best friend. That’s ground you don’t cross.”

“Mhm. Well. So long as you know I’m spoken for, that’s all that

matters.” Ryoko winked at him. “Okay, Sakura-chan — let’s go and leave these pathetic men behind, huh? Ryo Ohki’s getting impatient — I think she wants to dive for crabs again.”

“All right, I’m coming.” Sakura nodded, offering her companion a warm smile. “Lead the way.”

“You know, your fiancée is really something else, Masaki.” Hiroshi observed, as the two women headed back down to the water’s edge. “And I don’t mean just the fact she wasn’t born on this planet. I’m not quite sure what your secret is, but I’d really like it if you shared it with me. It seems completely unnatural that a guy as dense as you are with girls should net a babe like Ryoko without having to make any effort at all. What’s the deal? You must be doing *something* to keep her happy.”

“Ikeda.” Tenchi looked discomfited. “If this is going to be another conversation about whether Ryoko has any cute and available alien friends, and how to woo them...”

“No, I wasn’t going there.” Hiroshi shook his head. “From what you’ve said about her history, I imagine most of her friends are either homicidal maniacs or married princesses. Neither of which are really within my scope. But it just never fails to amaze me, that’s all. You’re a decent guy, I won’t deny it. And I’m not a girl, so I have no idea what your visual appeal is like. But this particular girl moved galaxies to live with you. What’s that about? How did you score that kind of coup?”

“Ryoko and I... have been through a lot of things together. Most of which you couldn’t even imagine.” Tenchi said pensively, as shrieks of laughter drifted up from the water’s edge. “She was a pirate when I met her, and she attracts the wild life to her more than occasionally. We’ve been in situations which have brought us closer together — that’s all. I don’t know how else to explain it. That’s just how it is.”

“Situations?” Hiroshi raised his eyebrow suggestively. “Do I want to even know?”

“Not that kind of situation.” Tenchi swiped at his friend playfully. “Your mind is on one subject and one subject only. No. I meant life and death situations... up there, in space.”

“So it is true, then. Really true.” Hiroshi eyed his friend thoughtfully. “You are as much an alien as she is... deep down, underneath the mild-mannered Earth boy exterior.”

“Technically I’m only a quarter Juraian.” Tenchi shook his head.

"I'm from the Earth — this is my home and the planet where I was born. I didn't even know Grandpa was from outside Japan until a few years ago, so I don't suppose I'll ever see myself any other way. But then again..."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it has made a difference." He admitted. "I've got a whole other perspective on the whole universe, now I know how big and varied it is."

"Sometimes I think I'd like to see more of what's out there, too." Hiroshi said pensively. "I mean, when the news first broke and that Princess babe was on television, it kind of made me realise that Ryoko isn't the only pretty girl in the universe. If there are a lot of cute chicks here on planet Earth, imagine how many there must be out there in the whole of existence. It's kind of mind blowing, when you think about it."

"Mm... you mean you might actually find one who's your type?" Tenchi teased. Hiroshi grimaced at him.

"That's the kind of thing I expect from Sakura. Not you." He scolded.

"Do you think we should go down and join them?" Tenchi wondered. "It is hot today, that's for sure. And I haven't had much of a chance to swim, yet. It might be nice to cool off."

"Ryoko's bikini finally got to you, huh?" Hiroshi bantered, and Tenchi pulled a face.

"Oh, shut up." He retorted, getting to his feet. "Are you coming, or aren't you?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Hiroshi followed his example, dusting the remains of the damp sand from his body. "If only to wash clean of this stuff — it sticks to you like nothing else."

As the two students reached the water's edge, Ryo Ohki darted out of the surf, pausing to shake her fur free of the water and then leaping up onto Tenchi's shoulder with an excited mew. Tenchi laughed, reaching up to stroke her damp fur, tickling her under the chin.

"Well, did you get any crabs, Ryo Ohki?" He asked playfully. "Or are they too quick for you when they're under the water?"

"Your cat is the oddest cat I ever met. I always thought cats hated water, but this one seems to love it." Hiroshi stretched out his hand to fondle Ryo Ohki's ears, and Ryo Ohki purred at the attention, rubbing

her head up against the earthling's fingers. "Although I shouldn't be surprised about anything when it comes to you and your family by now, Tenchi, should I? After all, nothing in your world is quite ordinary, is it?"

"Ryo Ohki belongs to Ryoko, really." Tenchi said with a grin, as the cabbit bounded up onto the top of his head, diving back towards the water as she did so. "So that should explain why she's not your average earth cat. Let's just say that she's a little different from any of our native species... she has her own special charm."

"That should have been obvious." Hiroshi acknowledged ruefully. "Yo, Sakura! Ryoko! Anyone up for another race? I've got my second wind now, and this time I'm not going to be left behind!"

"Is that a serious challenge, Ikeda?" Ryoko put her hands on her hips, amusement in her amber eyes. "Are you sure about that? I wiped the floor with you the last time, and I wasn't even trying. You don't want to be humiliated in front of everyone again, now do you?"

"Hey, go easy on him. He hasn't got all the magic you have." Tenchi slipped his hand around his fiancée's shoulders, and she cast him a playful grin. "Let him down easy, huh?"

"Fragile male egos." Sakura laughed. "I'm game for a race, so long as it's on the understanding that Ryoko doesn't use any of her magic whatsoever to win it. Is that fair enough?"

"Oh, I could swim rings around you with my hands tied behind my back, don't you worry yourself about that." Ryoko said carelessly. "I don't need to use my magic to beat you. I'm already faster."

"That's what I like to see. Modesty at work." Hiroshi observed dryly, and Ryoko shrugged her shoulders.

"Why lie?" She said flippantly. "It's true, and you know it. I'm game to race, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Before anyone could respond, Ryo Ohki shot out of the water once more, uttering a blood-curdling howl and Ryoko's expression changed as the small creature landed on her shoulder, her eyes clouding as she interpreted the tension in the little cabbit's body. Tenchi frowned, resting a gentle hand on her arm.

"Ryoko, what is it?" He asked softly. Ryoko did not answer him at once, turning towards the horizon and lifting her head to gaze up at the faint wisps of cloud that dotted the blue sky. Tenchi's frown deepened, and he followed her gaze, but he could see nothing amiss.



“Ryoko?” He murmured, as the cabbit arched her back, flexing her claws as she flattened her ears on her head. Ryoko’s expression darkened, and she nodded slowly.

“I know. I feel it too.”

Ryo Ohki yowled, a combative note in her voice as she poised herself against her mistress’s neck, as if preparing to launch into flight. Ryoko hesitated, then reached up to lift her companion down from her shoulder, meeting her gaze with a troubled one of her own.

“No. Not now. Too many people.” She said softly.

“Excuse me, can I possibly get the subtitled version here?” Hiroshi raised his hand, a plaintive expression in his dark eyes. “What’s going on? Ryoko, why are you talking to your cat... and what are you talking about?”

“Something’s not right.” Tenchi said quietly. “Ryoko, what’s the matter?”

Ryoko turned, and Tenchi’s heart skipped a beat at her expression.

“Ryo Ohki picked up a signal.” She said hesitantly. “From above the planet. It was the signal of... of a spacecraft. Hovering above the Earth’s surface... just beyond the atmosphere.”

“A spaceship?” Sakura’s eyes widened with alarm. “What kind of spaceship? I mean, do you mean friend or foe?”

“Wait a minute... you can *understand* what that critter says, when she howls at you?” Hiroshi stared blankly at the pirate, who eyed him impatiently.

“Of course, not that it’s important.” She said sharply. “Tenchi, Ryo Ohki’s not usually wrong about things like this, but... but if she’s right, I don’t understand what it means. The signal was one she knew... one we both know only too well. But I don’t see how it’s possible... not at all.”

“Tsunami-fune? Or a ship from Jurai?” Tenchi asked gently. Ryoko shook her head grimly.

“No.” She said flatly. “Not a friend, Tenchi. Believe me. Not even close.”

She sighed, gazing back towards the sky.

“But now it’s gone. Ryo Ohki can’t feel it any longer, and nor can I.” She added. “I think whatever it was — it’s left. At least, for the time being.”

“Stop talking in riddles... Ryoko, what ship!” Tenchi demanded, alarm flickering in his expression. “What’s got you both so wound up — tell me!”

“Well, I can’t see how it could have been.” Ryoko bit her lip. “But the signal was from the black ship Karasu, Tenchi.”

“K... Karasu?” Tenchi blanched, fear coursing through him at her words. “But that’s impossible! Haki is...”

“Haki was sealed. I know.” Ryoko stroked her fingers absently through Ryo Ohki’s chocolate fur, turning troubled eyes on her companion. “But that was what Ryo Ohki felt. And... and there was something oppressive in the air, Tenchi. Something dark enough to have been him. I don’t like this at all — and most of all, I don’t think we should be staying here any longer. If Haki really is up there, and this isn’t some mistake or trap or someone’s sick idea of a space joke, then he’s probably looking for us — for me most of all. And this isn’t the best place for a pirate attack.”

“A... pirate... *attack*?” Sakura went white, her eyes becoming big as her gaze flitted between pirate and prince. “What do you mean? Explain, one of you... what’s going on?”

“Ryo Ohki sensed a pirate ship in the Earth’s upper atmosphere, and if she was right, it’s bad news.” Tenchi said shortly, reaching across to grip Sakura by the arm. “Come on... Sakura, Hiroshi, we have to leave the beach and quickly. We need to get back to the mountains, where it’s less exposed and where there are less people, too.”

“A pirate ship, huh?” Hiroshi quickened his pace as they hurried up the beach, gathering up their belongings and pulling wraps and jackets over the top of their damp swimming clothes. “But *you* were a pirate, weren’t you, Ryoko-san? Why are you running scared?”

“This particular pirate has something of an axe to grind with me.” Ryoko said grimly, and Ryo Ohki let out a hiss of agreement, pawing the air with claws flexed. “Ryo Ohki and I both, most likely. I flew with him, once, but we had something of a run in when he decided to start killing people to get hold of some powerful Juraian gems. Tenchi and I helped to seal him somewhere he couldn’t hurt anyone — but if Ryo Ohki was right, it looks like somehow he’s managed to free himself. And if he has, well, I can imagine that we’re probably top of his hitlist.”

“So this isn’t one of the loveable rogue type pirates then?”

“That would be an understatement.” Tenchi said blackly. “Haki is not someone you want to encounter, ever. The last time we met him, the effort of confining him almost cost Ryoko her life. Needless to say we’re not anxious to repeat the experience.”

Ryoko gazed briefly back towards the sky once again, then she frowned, holding out her hands.

“Grab hold of me, all of you.” She ordered. “I’m taking us home the quick way. The sooner we get back to the mountains, the sooner I can ask Washu if it’s even possible to escape from a sub-space imprisonment. And if so, what in hell we can do to get him back where he belongs, before he hurts someone!”

## Chapter 3

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### Chapter Three

“Well, I think I’m just about ready.”

Princess Sasami cast a final look around her chamber, nodding with approval as she observed the neatly packed cases and boxes which were stacked up at the foot of her bed. All around her, men and women dressed in the uniform of Jurai’s imperial guard flitted like moths, gathering her belongings, and as she watched them, she felt a flare of excitement well up inside of her.

So this was it. Her first official progress across Juraian territory.

“You seem excited, Sasami-hime.”

A man’s voice came from the doorway, and Sasami’s eyes lit up as she recognised Kamidake, one of the knights of Jurai. She hurried across to join him, grasping him playfully by the hands as she did so.

“Kamidake! So you *are* coming with me? Oh good! I hoped that Uncle would release both you and Azaka for my first time — after all, you are Tsunami’s chosen, and all of that!”

“Lord Haru forbade you to leave without us.” Amusement sparkled in Kamidake’s clever violet eyes. “I’m glad that it pleases you, Princess. Your father is very anxious about this whole trip, as I’m sure you can imagine — and your Lord Uncle also. The Emperor knows that you must go, of course, but they both worry for your safety.”

“I’ll be fine.” Sasami drew herself up to her full four foot two inches, resolution sparkling in her crimson gaze. “I’m not a baby any more, Kamidake, and I have to do things like this some time. Besides, Yousai have called for our help — or rather, for Tsunami’s help. We can’t exactly turn them down... and it’s not as if we’re going anywhere very dangerous, is it? Yousai are loyal to Jurai — that’s what Father told me, when I asked him. They’ve always been loyal.”

“Yes, so I understand.” Kamidake inclined his head slightly, in answer to her question. “And it’s true that Yousai require you in a spiritual capacity, so it seems unlikely that there will be anything particularly dangerous to face. The Council of Representatives have simply asked that Tsunami travel to Yousai in her human form, to bless their shrines and grant them Tsunami’s protection once again. In

times past, they've been unsettled by dark magics — I think they just want to ensure peace, especially as the young Lady of Yousai has now reached her own Coming of Age.”

“Lady of Yousai.” Sasami echoed him thoughtfully, then she grinned. “It sounds so formal, doesn't it? Just like when they call me Princess Sasami of Jurai. I wonder how she feels about all of this. She is only my age, after all — isn't that right? She's just thirteen, like me.”

“That's what I understand.” Kamidake agreed. “And it's becoming chaotic in here — shall we head down to Tsunami-fune's dock? Azaka is already waiting for us there, and I believe Lord Tennan will probably be wondering at our whereabouts, too.”

“Seiryō-sama is coming on this trip, too?” Sasami's eyes sparkled. “Oh, good. I hoped so... Father's still so stuffy about him, even though Uncle's forgiven him everything and it's all all right now. He wasn't happy when I asked to have Seiryō as part of my retinue, so I thought he might try and stop him coming to Yousai with me. But I want someone who's strong and smart and who isn't easily swayed by all this spiritual stuff. He has his feet on the ground, and I need that. Being Tsunami in a public sense is confusing enough — since Uncle's proclamation last month, everything's been haywire.”

“Not just Lord Tennan, hime-sama.” Kamidake sounded amused, as he led the way through the palace halls towards the expansive docking bay where Sasami's own magnificent ship, the Tsunami-fune was currently moored. “The Emperor has also released one other to accompany us on this mission — at his own request, Lord Motonoya will be joining us.”

Sasami stopped dead, staring up at her companion in undisguised dismay.

“Yurikage-sama is coming too?” She asked, distress flickering in her crimson eyes. “But why? Why, Kamidake? What was Uncle thinking?”

“Yurikage-sama is a very strong and brave young man.” Kamidake said evenly. “And he is very loyal to the Emperor and to your cause, Lady Sasami. You should be glad that he is accompanying you.”

“But Kamidake...” Sasami faltered, biting her lip. “Kamidake, he... he...”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“He thinks he wants to marry me.” She said apprehensively. “Even though Father has said I'm not open to courtship offers until I'm

eighteen, and I'm happy with that settlement. He's already been to speak to Father and Uncle about it on more than one occasion, and he's made it clear that he's willing to wait the four and a half years, if that's what it takes. I think Father likes him a little too much, to be honest — he said he wasn't going to arrange my marriage like he did Ayeka's, but... I..."

"Lord Motonoya is probably quite an eligible match, you know." Kamidake reflected, as he guided his charge gently onwards towards the waiting spaceships. "He has good morals and ethics, he's the eldest son of a high standing Juraian family, and you could certainly find a worse companion in intellect. That he is willing to wait shows he has genuine compassion for you — you should be glad of that fact."

"No, it shows he wants to marry Jurai's Goddess and he doesn't mind waiting to do it, if that's what it takes to get his way." Sasami said bitterly. "He only started showing interest in me since Uncle's proclamation about Tsunami... he's just like all the others. It's stifling and I don't want to be in that position. Please, Kamidake, can't we stop him from coming to Yousai? I really really don't want him to accompany me there."

"The decision is the Emperor's, Hime-sama. I cannot challenge his will, and nor can you. Not yet." Kamidake shook his head. "Besides, you are mistaken about Lord Motonoya's motives. I happen to know that he spoke to your father when you first came of age... I don't think his determination rests in your connection to the Goddess."

"Really?" Sasami looked doubtful. "I don't know. There's something a bit weird about a grown man who wants to marry a thirteen year old girl, don't you think so? I mean, Lord Motonoya must be about Tenchi's age, at the very least. He's a lot older than I am."

"Princesses and Princes operate on different rules to others, Hime-sama, and it would not be my place to comment on them."

"Perhaps." Sasami sighed heavily, fixing her companion with a troubled look. "So you think I should be considering his suit, then? You don't think that it's... well, you don't disapprove of his attentions towards me?"

"Hime, don't ask me questions that you know I won't answer." Kamidake told her lightly. "It isn't my business to intervene in such things, as well you know."

Sasami looked pained, but she nodded her head, falling reluctantly into step with him once more as they reached the arched doorway that led out to the docking bay. Kamidake swept his palm across the

security lock, and as the light flickered green, the big wooden doors swung back, revealing the expansive bay beyond. At the furthest end, Tsunami-fune's iridescent hull gleamed with mystical energy, and alongside it, Sasami was somewhat comforted to see the smaller silver hull of the Unko, Seiryō Tennen's state of the art craft. Although the Tennen ship was one of the best in the Juraian fleet, it was nothing in comparison to the Queen of Royal Tree Ships, and despite her apprehension, Sasami felt a stab of pride as she laid eyes on her own vessel. Tsunami's ship responded to noone but her, she knew that — and in some respects she felt her ship was more like a sister and a friend than just a travelling unit.

"Sasami-hime!" As they stepped forth onto the wood-veneer walkway, they were accosted by a young man in his early twenties, thick fair hair drawn back from his face with a silver clasp as he swept low before the Princess. "Are you ready? Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Yurikage-sama." Sasami faltered, then offered the nobleman a faint smile, discomfited by his flamboyant greeting. "Kamidake was just telling me that you were coming too."

"It is my pleasure to travel across space with my Lady Princess on her first official voyage into Jurai's territories." Yurikage said earnestly, offering her a smile. "And your ship is quite prepared to leave. Lord Tennen and I have been ready for your word — now you are here, we can make a move to start forth for Yousai."

"Sasami-sama." Before Sasami could respond, a second man had approached them, bowing his head slightly as he greeted the Princess, and Sasami could see the amusement in his malachite eyes as he cast a fleeting glance at his young noble companion. "It seems that we're at your disposal for this trip, by Lord Azusa's will as well as your own."

Sasami hesitated for a moment, then she nodded her head, offering the nobleman a warm smile.

"Thank you, Lord Tennen." She said simply, in imitation of the manner she had seen her sister use when dealing with official matters. "I am ready to leave now."

Seiryō's amusement only grew at the formality in her young tone, but he made no demur, inclining his head once again as he gestured towards the waiting vessels.

"Azaka and Kamidake have been charged by the Emperor with the safety of your person." He said quietly, though the warmth in his tone belied the distant formality of his words. "Therefore it seems best to

me that they travel with you, aboard Tsunami-fune. Yurikage-sama and I will follow on aboard the Unko.”

Relief flickered in Sasami’s crimson eyes, and she offered Seiryō a grin, forgetting her formality for a moment. Seiryō winked at her, casting Yurikage a sidelong glance as the young nobleman bowed his head once again.

“We will be within your reach at any time, my Lady. Please, we are at your command — do not hesitate to call us to your side.” He said fervently.

Sasami glanced at him, startled, then she dimpled, nodding her head.

“Yes, of course.” She agreed. “Thank you, Lord Motonoya.”

“Lady Sasami, we should probably leave before night falls.” Azaka stepped forward at that moment. “Before the evening patrols set out on their usual foray around Juraian space. We don’t want to get caught in cross-traffic, and everything is primed for your departure. The military will escort us half way, and Yousai’s own military units will greet us and convey us to the planet itself. Everything is in order.”

“Then we’ll go.” Sasami nodded her head decidedly. “Very well, Azaka. Lead the way.”

So close and yet so far away.

Haki clenched his fists, anger swirling through his body as Karasu sped through space, hurtling away from the Earth at speed. He had been so near to his goal, and had even smelt the scent of her blood, in anticipation of their encounter. But before he had been able to launch his attack, sharp forces had drawn him back from the planet’s clouded atmosphere, hauling him back into the depths of space.

He muttered a dark curse, turning to fix his travel companion with a dark glare as he advanced on the small blue-feathered bird, menace in his expression.

“How long do you think you can plague me for, bird-boy?” He demanded darkly, his tone rich with resentment and hate. “I can crush you with one flick of my fingers — how dare you think you can watch my every move and spy for your witch woman?”

Rumiya lifted his head from where he had been absently preening his feathers, extending his neck out just far enough to land a neat peck against Haki’s scarred skin. It was the lightest of touches, but Haki



sprang back as if burnt, letting out a cry of pain and rage.

“What are you doing?”

“Reminding you that you can’t touch me, so long as I am in this form.” Rumiya told him calmly. “I already explained it to you. Lady Ramia has put a protective charm over my feathers, so that I can fly unmolested through space without being hindered by any force alien to her. Your magic is strong, but base and inferior to the power that she wields. She holds your life in her hands, just as she holds mine. You should make up your mind to cooperate with her, if you truly wish to be able to exact your personal vengeance at the end of this. She has given you back your life — in return, you must give her your fidelity. If you do so, then you will be rewarded by your freedom at the end of it. That is the spell that she has cast around your neck — those beads will only allow you to live and breathe so long as you are following her will. Ramia-sama has no interest in the planet Earth or this Ryoko pirate woman who you’re so obsessed with. So we’re going back towards Yousai, and you had better accept that. Otherwise you might find it a little more painful than just a peck of my beak. I’ve been preening my feathers all morning, so the magic that touched you is potent... but it’s nothing compared with what Ramia-sama will do if you dare to defy her.”

“I’m not afraid of this Ramia woman.” Haki glowered, anger in his expression, and he grabbed at the beaded chain, struggling to remove it. As he did so, however, a bright flare of red light encompassed him, burning through his skin, and causing him to drop to the ground, still fighting to break free. Rumiya watched from his perch, waiting patiently for the pirate to recognise the futility of his actions, and at length Haki realised that it was to no avail. The more he fought, the tighter the beads clung to his skin, and he released his grasp, cursing Rumiya loudly in the foulest language he could muster.

“Let me run this by you again.” The bird said levelly, flapping his wings and sending loose feathers tumbling to the floor of the Karasu, where they burned and dropped into ash. “Lady Ramia is the Lady of Yousai, but she was originally a high-born mage of Airai, who married the late Lord of Yousai when she was still young. Ten years ago, she was confined in a tower by the magic of Jurai, just as you were confined in subspace. From this tower, she has a certain amount of influence, but the charms placed around the entrance and exit prevent anyone with Arian blood from passing through. After ten years of confinement, Lady Ramia has had enough of her prison, and seeks to be free once more.”

“If she’s so powerful, why can’t she get herself out?” Haki demanded, dropping down against Karasu’s bulky units as he folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t see why she needs me, little boy. I didn’t ask her to free me from subspace — I’m not without power of my own, you know. I would have broken free eventually — and I’m not afraid of this woman’s power. I can’t be killed, because Karasu and I are connected to one another. So your threats are useless. I’m not a fool. I don’t owe you or anyone anything, and I won’t let that Ramia woman intervene in my quest for blood.”

“You really are an ungrateful wretch, aren’t you.” Rumiya sighed heavily. “I’ll lay it on the line for you. Without Ramia-sama, you have no life. She cannot break through the spells of Jurai that surround her own prison — she can only act from within, and her power is limited by the aura Azusa-sama and his people placed around the tower ten years ago. If she was able to wield her full magic against the people of Yousai, she would not need you or anyone else to help her. But as it is, she can only protect me so long as I take on a small, simple form such as this. And she can only give you half of your life until she is free to complete the spell.”

He cocked his heads, eying the pirate with glittering, thoughtful golden eyes.

“The beads place a barrier between the spell the Juraians put on you and your body, but it’s easily broken, and it won’t last forever.” He continued. “The spell over you can’t be completely destroyed except by a great force of will. You *need* Ramia-sama. And in turn, she needs you... someone not of Arian blood, someone who cannot be killed by the spells or the guards. There is something else, you see — someone else in this equation that Ramia-sama seeks. Her lady daughter has come of age in the last few months, and is now old enough to have a say in Yousai’s politics for herself. Ramia seeks to reunite herself with the girl — and she needs someone to rip her away from the Council’s protective custody — someone willing to kill anyone who happens to be in the way. Ramia-sama and her daughter are Yousai’s true governors, but to crush the will of the council and the protection of Jurai, she needs someone strong and ruthless. She needs you to break through and destroy the tower in which she has been held for the past decade, and to take her lady daughter away from Yousai, where she is still guarded by Jurai’s dirty charms. It is in your interest to help her. She will help you in return, and then you will be free to roam and terrorise the universe once again.”

“Terrorise...” Haki’s eyes narrowed to mere slits as he pondered this. “And then I can take my revenge on Ryoko?”

“You can do as you please.” Rumiya flicked his tail carelessly. “I doubt it matters, since noone will be likely to stand in your way.”

“I see.” Haki paused, and his grotesque faced twisted into a slight smile. “Then perhaps there is something to be gained from this alliance after all, bird-boy.”

“That is what I’ve been trying to tell you, you stupid pirate.” Rumiya sounded exasperated, and Haki glowered at him, raising a hand and shooting a bolt of white energy in the bird’s direction. Despite himself, Rumiya jumped, starting on his perch, and Haki let out a low chuckle.

“Next time I won’t miss. I like to barbeque as well as to carve holes in my victims.” He said softly. “You can tell your Lady Ramia that I will do as she asks, but that she should be wary. Making deals with pirates is always a dangerous business, after all — she should watch her back.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Rumiya rolled his eyes skywards.

Haki bent to the floor, retrieving a scrap of black fabric from where it had fallen beneath Karasu’s control panel. It was dusty, and flecked at the edges with blood, but he rubbed it clean, looping it around his face as he covered his scarred visage from view.

“Haki the pirate cannot be killed, yet the universe still thinks it can defeat me.” He said softly. “Listen to me, bird. I was the most notorious pirate there ever was. I betrayed the Daluma and slaughtered their men, when they came after me. I stole from the Dark Prince of Jurai, and sought his Jurai magic for my own ends. I would have had it, too, if not for that ingrate Ryoko — that bastard child I trained and moulded to use as a foil for Jurai’s gems. Curse that woman — she is the reason I spent so long in that awful place! But I will not rest until I have taken her head. This time I will succeed — I will take Ryoko *and* the Dark Heart of Jurai. Freeing your Ramia is a small job indeed — barely even worth a moment of my time. But the Dark Heart holds immense power from the core of Jurai itself... and with it, I will hold influence over the whole of the universe. Then where will your mistress be then, bird-boy? I could kill her with just a single thought.”

“It would be nice if you shut up, once in a while.” Rumiya spread his wings, launching himself into flight. “I have to return to Yousai, and make my report. Lady Ramia is calling me. But don’t forget that you are bound to her. If you can take her daughter alive, and free them both from the shackles of Yousai, she will grant you your true

freedom — but you must do her bidding before you do your own. She is not a patient or forgiving woman — you might want to keep that in mind.”

With that he flickered and disappeared, and Haki let out a roar of frustration.

“That creature thinks he can tell me what to do?” He raged. “Karasu, such arrogance! Do they not know who I am? Who Haki is?”

Karasu’s screen blinked and flickered into life, a grainy image blurring slowly into focus and Haki paused, eying it thoughtfully.

“Yes, that is what I truly seek.” He whispered, reaching out a finger to touch the woman’s face. “Ryoko, I don’t forget grievances. You can’t destroy something you can’t kill, and no prison is foolproof. However I came to be free, I will seek you out again and I will kill you and all who shield you. I haven’t forgotten your betrayal, and I will make you pay for it. Karasu found Ryo Ohki’s signal, and I know you and that damn living ship are never far apart. Mark my words, Ryoko... your days are truly numbered now that I am free to roam the universe once again!”

“So run this whole thing by us once again.”

Sakura settled herself on the soft reddish sofa that graced the Masaki living room, taking a sip of her tea and cupping the mug in her hands as she glanced across the chamber to where an agitated pirate was pacing anxiously across the floor. “Ryoko, stop doing that, will you? You’re starting to make me nervous — whatever it was went away, didn’t it? I mean, nothing happened, after all.”

“Damn Washu.” Ryoko muttered, her eyes narrowing as she clenched her fists. “Why, of all days, did she choose today to meet with the Science Consortium? I thought her work with them was finished — why is she still pandering to their needs? I need her, damn it!”

“Ryoko-san, take a chill pill.” Hiroshi held up his hands. “Sakura’s right -all the pacing is starting to make my eyes go funny. Tenchi’s gone to the shrine to find this Yume girl — so what’s the big deal? Nothing did actually happen, and whoever this pirate is, it looks like he went away again. Right?”

“You really don’t get it.” Ryoko sighed heavily, settling herself atop the table and crossing her legs in front of her. “And I really hope you won’t have to get it, either. This guy is bad news on a grand scale.”

Ryo Ohki leapt up onto the sofa, curling up against the cushions with a mew of agreement as she began to lick the sea-salt out of her fur, and Sakura frowned, reaching across to gently ruffle the cabbit's fur.

"Well, then explain it to us." She said evenly. "There's a lot of weird things in your life, I know that. And I get that not everything you do or have done is going to immediately be obvious to either Hiroshi and I. We come from different worlds. But we are your friends too, as well as Tenchi's. And I've not seen you so wound up since that Tennan man came and attacked the nightclub in Osaka. This is obviously a big deal — is it something else like that?"

"Seiryō Tennan is a drop in the ocean in comparison." Ryoko muttered, twisting her fingers absently through the sash of her gown as she spoke. "I don't even know where to begin explaining Haki. Just that if there's anyone in the universe he'd come seeking now, it'd be me. I don't understand why, if Karasu really was overhead, he left so easily. It bothers me... it's not like him at all."

"Karasu is a... spaceship, right?" Hiroshi hazarded, and Ryoko nodded her head, uttering another sigh.

"Yes." She agreed slowly. "Well, I suppose I'll try and put you in the picture — although I'll not be happy until Washu is here and she can check all her systems personally. She's hacked so many intergalactic radars that if something has happened, she'll be able to find out in a matter of seconds. And the sooner we know, the sooner we can try and work out what we can do."

"It sounds like you and this Haki guy have a history." Sakura said astutely. "Is he jealous of your relationship with Tenchi... is that it?"

"Jealous?" Ryoko stared, then she shook her head impatiently.

"Don't be stupid." She said frankly. "Haki is a lot older than me, and even if he was interested in me for those ends, it would never have been an issue. I was his apprentice, not his lover. He took me aboard his ship when I was twelve or thirteen, and inducted me into the world of pirates. He promised me freedom outside the law, and bonded me to that life. Up until recently, I still had the scar of that bond."

"But you were just a child!" Sakura's eyes widened. "Why would you *want* to be a pirate?"

"Ryo Ohki and I didn't really have any other options." Ryoko exchanged glances with her spaceship, who mewed in sympathy. "We

were on our own. Scraping a meal was difficult and we didn't really have anywhere safe to stay. It wasn't like I had either a mother or a father in those days — I didn't know about Washu, and even if I had, she was a long way from Jurai and well out of my reach. I liked the idea of seeing so many places and doing what I wanted, when I wanted. And in some respects, I still do — I'm not unhappy that he took me on, even if he had his own reasons for doing so."

"Which were?" Hiroshi asked curiously. "This is a story that Tenchi hasn't told me!"

"I'm the bastard daughter of Jurai's traitor Prince." Ryoko said bluntly. "He had an obsession with these gemstones from Jurai, and harnessing their power. He took me in and protected me because he intended to use me in his pursuit of them. They were tuned by my father to his bloodline, and so Haki hoped that I would be able to wield them. Then he could drain their magic from me and use it for his own ends. In the end, though, I wielded the magic against him and we used it to imprison him."

"It's almost like a movie." Sakura rested her chin in her hands. "So now you think he's got out of this prison and is coming for his revenge?"

"I think it's very odd that, if he is loose, he didn't come get it this afternoon." Ryoko said acidly. "Haki is a bloodthirsty, butchering monster, and he wouldn't mind slaying a few innocent Earthlings in his pursuit of me. He likes blood... I think he really enjoys every killing. Holding back isn't his usual technique... it bothers me."

Sakura shivered.

"I don't like the sound of that." She murmured. "You think he'd come and kill just anyone he met, if it meant he could get a hold of you?"

"I think he'd kill anyone, regardless of whether I was there or not." Ryoko said bitterly. "Before I joined up with him, he betrayed a powerful and dangerous pirate guild and slaughtered several of the members with very little trouble. I saw him do many bad things, when I was in his charge. I learnt to keep out of his way when he was angry, and I'm sure that if he hadn't needed me, he would have killed me. I'm sure there were times he held himself back. I took bruises, but he never went for me with any seriousness."

She shrugged, leaning back on her hands.

"Then there was a Galaxy Police raid, and his ship was blown to

pieces.” She added. “I escaped his grasp, and was able to be a pirate on my own terms for the first time. I thought he was dead. Trouble is, I didn’t know that his ship had other ideas. Karasu is a Phoenix ship, and I don’t understand how it works exactly, but, well, you know the legend of the Phoenix, right? The bird that rises from the ashes?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hiroshi nodded, then, “Wait, are you saying that his *spaceship* brought him back from the dead?”

“Just that.” Ryoko said grimly. “Each time Haki is slain and his ship is destroyed, Karasu brings them both back, strengthening their bond and their power, but also making him more demonic and just flat out crazy. The last time we faced him, he’d taken the Crown Princess of Jurai his prisoner, in the hopes of ransoming her for the Juraian gems. Defeating him on that occasion was the thing which got me my pardon — and means I can fly free across the universe. But as Tenchi said, it almost cost me my life. I’m not overly anxious to repeat the experience.”

“What happened to the gemstones?” Sakura asked. “Could he just be looking for them again, and not you at all?”

“Well, either way, it doesn’t spell good news for us.” Ryoko glanced absently at her wrists. “The gems combined with my body when I used them against my father in battle. They’re a part of me now. Even if he did come looking for them, he’d still find himself on my doorstep.”

She looked troubled.

“I don’t want to leave the Earth, and I don’t want to be hunted down. I’d rather be the hunter than the prey.” She added. “But right now I’d settle for knowing exactly what’s going on. It sets me on edge and I don’t like it... if he’s free, I want to know about it, so I can work out what we need to do.”

“Is this guy... more powerful than you are, Ryoko?” Hiroshi asked hesitantly. Ryoko shrugged.

“He was then. I don’t know about now.” She said pensively. “The gems did enhance my magic, but then again, it took three of us plus them to seal him in the first place. There’s a pretty good chance that he is still stronger than me, even considering that fact.”

“Wow.” Sakura shook her head slowly. “I guess we kinda get this view of you being this amazingly strong alien pirate woman who can do just about anything she likes and who can kick the crap out of anyone on this planet. But I suppose in a galactic sense it’s not like

that. I mean, there must be others who are stronger than you are... right? We just don't see them so much here on the Earth."

"There are much stronger forces out there, sadly for me." Ryoko said ruefully. "There aren't many who can match Tenchi, however."

"*Masaki*? Are you kidding me?" Hiroshi snorted. "The guy fell down half a flight of steps at college the other day because he caught his foot on his bag strap and went flying. Are you telling me that he has more magic than you do? You can't be serious."

"Thanks, Ikeda. That confidence in my abilities makes me feel really well appreciated." At that moment Tenchi pushed open the door of the salon, casting his friend a wry smile as he ushered his companion inside. "It's nice to know how my friends see me."

"Well, it's a fair point though." Sakura said absently. "You do trip over your own feet most weeks. Plus there was that time in first year when that guy's dog got loose on campus and the mutt trampled you down trying to lick you to death. You didn't do so good getting him off your case... it doesn't exactly scream heroic."

Despite herself, Ryoko chuckled at her fiance's expression.

"I guess there have been a few times he's fallen off the shrine gateway and I've had to catch him." She acknowledged. "I didn't say he always knew what to do with his power. When he manages to use it, I've not seen anyone able to get past it. But most of the time he hasn't got a clue what he's doing. It's definitely a quality not quantity situation."

"Hey, I do my best." Tenchi defended himself. "I just don't need to fight evil forces on a daily basis, and there's not really any call for it here on the Earth."

"Ryoko, Tenchi says you want my help." The prince's companion spoke at that moment, casting the pirate a smile. "What's the matter? He said something about a spaceship — a *Karasu*?"

"You don't know about Haki — it was before you came to live with us." Ryoko said with a nod of her head. "I don't know if you can even begin to find out what I need, Yume — but Ryo Ohki picked up a signal from a very specific spaceship when we were at the beach. She thinks it's *Karasu*, a pirate ship with regenerative qualities... and she's not usually wrong."

"I see." Yume frowned. "And this pirate is bad news, I trust?"

"Very." Ryoko agreed grimly. Yume pursed her lips, holding out her



hands to Ryo Ohki, who leapt up into her grip, raising amber eyes to her companion.

“You’re sure about this, aren’t you?” The droid reflected. “I can see it in your eyes. I trust your sensors, Ryo Ohki. Washu isn’t here, but I’ll see what I can find out for you. I can access most of her computer systems, after all — if need be, I have access to her genetic blueprint. It wouldn’t be the first time I hacked her entry codes.”

“Then do that, if you don’t mind.” Ryoko looked relieved. “I know it might seem a lot of fuss when nothing actually happened, but believe me, we need to know the truth.”

“I’m feeling rather like we skipped over a couple of pages at once again.” Hiroshi remarked. “What’s all this about signals and genetic blueprints and sensors? I might be seeing things, but Tenchi, isn’t that girl the woman who helps cook and clean your house? And that’s definitely Ryoko’s cat she’s holding... right? Because does anyone else see a problem with this picture? Pirate ships might be massing over the horizon, but are you really so desperate that you’re relying on your housekeeper and your pet to solve the mystery?”

Ryoko stared at him for a moment, bemused, and Tenchi clapped a hand on his friend’s arm, amusement in his dark eyes.

“You know that Ryoko’s mother Washu is a scientist. Yume is her assistant, as well as being something of a domestic whiz.” He said quietly. “And Ryo Ohki is Ryoko’s spaceship... she’s not just a pet cat.”

“A... spaceship?” Sakura’s eyes almost fell out of her head. “That little creature? But she’s tiny... and... and so cute! How on earth would you get inside her?”

“Both Ryo Ohki and I were built based on technology developed by Washu when she was at the Science Academy.” Yume flashed the girl a smile. “We both have the ability to change our form as suits us — Ryo Ohki spends much of her time on land in this form, but when Ryoko wants to travel, she becomes a ship and one of the fastest and most versatile ships that exist, even now. I’m not a spaceship — I’m just a droid who can change her appearance — but at times my computer systems can still be put to good use.”

“You... you’re not human?” Hiroshi blinked. “Really? Damn it. That’s just not fair. You shouldn’t be allowed to look so damn pretty, if you’re nothing more than nuts and bolts!”

Yume laughed.

“I’m an organic computer system, which means I have independent thoughts and feelings beyond my programming.” She said with a grin. “But I choose to look this way because people on this world more easily accept what they expect to see. It’s the disguise I had when I first met Tenchi and his family... and so I’ve kept it. That’s all.”

“You really do have a very weird family, Tenchi-kun.” Sakura flopped back onto the sofa, closing her eyes, and Tenchi looked rueful.

“Perhaps.” He admitted. “Yume, do you think you can reference what Ryo Ohki picked up, and find out if it’s possible that Karasu is still out there?”

“I’ll get on to it right now... and I’ll also send out a signal to Washu, telling her that we need her help.” Yume nodded her head. “Ryoko, try not to worry... if there’s anything I can discover, I’ll let you know as soon as possible!”

## Chapter 4

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### Chapter Four

“So, this is the planet Yousai.”

Sasami stepped daintily down from the landing bay, accepting Kamidake’s hand with a playful grin as she skipped neatly onto the finely polished floor of the walkway. Ahead of her was a short passage and at the furthest end, an ornately designed door which glittered and sparkled in the artificial light of the hall. “It looks almost like we’re going into a magical palace — don’t you think so, Kamidake?”

“I’ve heard that Yousai was first annexed by Jurai because of the vast array of minerals it produced.” Kamidake agreed. “Gemstones of all different types, so I’ve heard. No doubt they use the same stones to decorate their own dwellings, as well as to sell to other lands.”

“A land full of crystals.” Sasami murmured. “So pretty.”

“Lady Sasami! Lady Sasami!” As they made their way towards the doorway, there was an eager voice from behind them, and Sasami paused, an unreadable expression on her face as she turned to greet the two accompanying lords. It had been Yurikage who had spoken and, as she gazed at him, he bowed low before her.

“I trust you had a safe journey, my lady?” He asked anxiously. “Tsunami-fune is a fine ship, but it’s been such a long voyage. Are you not tired?”

“Thank you, Lord Motonoya, but I think I’m all right.” Sasami gathered herself, offering the lord a faint smile. “Thank you for worrying about me, but I’ve travelled further in a day before. Ayeka and I went to the Earth, remember — and that’s much further from Jurai than Yousai.”

“Such strength and vitality.” Yurikage seemed impressed, and Sasami blushed at his blatant compliment. “Tsunami’s spirit is strong within you indeed.”

“So people keep telling me.” Sasami said ruefully.

“Lady Sasami, the Yousai escort officials would like us to accompany them to the centre of the Court Hall.” Seiryō put in at that moment, folding his arms casually across his chest as he cast Yurikage an amused and resigned look. “Azaka will stay with the ships and

ensure both are securely moored here — but we shouldn't keep the Council of Yousai waiting. After all, we've come all this way to answer their plea."

"I agree." Sasami nodded her head determinedly. "All right, Seiryosama. Will you lead the way?"

"Allow me, my Princess." Before Seiryosama could speak, Yurikage put up his hands. "It will be an honour to defend my Princess with my life."

"Lord Motonoya, I believe that Yousai is a peaceful planet and a sworn ally of Jurai's Emperor." Kamidake put in evenly, though amusement sparkled in his violet eyes and Sasami pinkened at her companion's obvious humour. Yurikage, on the other hand, did not seem at all discomfited, sending Kamidake a warm smile.

"Indeed, but you never know when treason might be lurking beneath the surface." He said decidedly, his hand resting on the sword that hung at his side. "Please, my Lady — will you allow me the honour of leading your party inside?"

"If that will make you happy, then sure." Sasami nodded her head slowly. "Thank you, Lord Motonoya."

"That boy needs a swift whack over the head with the hilt of his blade." Seiryosama observed quietly, as the fair haired youth hurried on ahead, pausing only when he realised the doors had not yet swung back to allow them entry to the halls beyond.

"Seiryosama!" Sasami stared at her companion. "That's not very nice."

"Perhaps not, but true nonetheless." Seiryosama shrugged, spreading his hands. "He is young and foolish and he has an unhealthy fixation with your well-being. I would advise him that your heart is not a trophy to be won, before he makes a real idiot out of himself. He won't listen to anyone else's word."

"What have you said to him?" Sasami looked startled. Seiryosama shook her head.

"Nothing, my Lady." He said evenly. "It would be a waste of my time, so I'm not going to even try. But I'm just giving you some wise advice. Lord Motonoya has it fixed in his mind that he will be your husband and that somehow you need his protection. You're the only one who can tell him otherwise... it might be worth considering before the silly fool does do something rash and throw his life away needlessly."

Sasami sighed heavily.

“I don’t want to be unkind to him. He’s so good to me, really, and he always treats me with respect.” She said sadly. “But he makes me uncomfortable, with all this marriage and devotion talk. I don’t like it at all — I’m not even fourteen yet.”

“Well, if it were Suki that he were pursuing, I’d have put him well in his place by now.” Seiryō reflected. “Unfortunately I don’t feel I have the same right to act in your name.”

“I think Lady Sasami is capable of speaking and deciding for herself, Lord Tennan.” Kamidake said gravely, and Seiryō frowned.

“I realise, and I mean her no disrespect.” He said simply. “I’m just advising her, as is my job. Both as her friend and as her representative.”

“Your Highness, we are honoured to welcome you to our humble planet!”

At that moment the ornate doors swung open, and two men, robed in official, fine fabrics bowed low before them in perfect synchronisation. The taller of the two had spoken and as he stepped forward to greet them properly, Sasami was aware of the silver symbol of Tsunami’s tree stitched neatly into the breast of his outfit. She offered them a slight smile, bowing her head in response to his greeting.

“Thank you. I’m really excited to come.” She said, dimpling as she held out her hands. “I wanted to see Yousai for myself. My friends have told me that you’re famous for your jewel production, as well as being one of my Uncle’s strongest allies within the Empire. I’m glad to be here.”

“You are too kind, my Lady.” The man bowed once again. “If you and your party would accompany us, we shall lead you to the presence of our heiress, the Lady of Yousai. You must all be tired from your trip, and we seek to offer you the finest hospitality that we can whilst you are here.”

“I think perhaps we’ve found Lord Motonoya’s spiritual mothership.” Seiryō murmured, just loud enough for Sasami to hear, and the Princess shot him a dark look, then offered the Councillors a sunny smile.

“That would be nice. Thank you very much.” She said prettily. “We are not tired, but we are eager to meet the Lady. And perhaps my companions are hungry... we didn’t have time to eat on the trip here.”

“We shall accomodate your needs, Princess.” The Councillor agreed gravely. “If you will all please come this way.”

As the four followed the two robed men through the network of hallways, Sasami was struck by the careful, delicate nature of the engravings that covered the walls, each gently dusted with gemstone to give it life and energy all of its own. Tsunami’s image appeared on more than one occasion, but unlike the image Sasami was used to seeing on Jurai, there was no tree depicted in these illustrations. Instead the Goddess stood benevolent over the people that walked below her, the ten glittering wings of the Light Hawk coated in pure silver to make them appear truly ethereal. For a moment, Sasami paused, captivated by the beauty of the artwork. Then, as Kamidake gently touched her arm, she remembered where she was and, shooting him an embarrassed grin, she picked up her pace as they finally reached their destination.

The central chamber was completely round in design, with a domed roof that rose high above them, supported by strong beams of a material Sasami did not recognise. The walls were finely finished with a floral design, each flower centred by another of the gemstones Sasami had noticed earlier, and the floor beneath their feet was soft and woven in bright, vivid shades. In the centre of this chamber was a gold-edged chair, placed on a raised dais above a circle of lesser seats, and seated in this elaborate throne was a young girl, somehow dwarfed by the magnitude of the room and the sombre atmosphere of the people who attended her. At their entrance, she stood, then hesitated, as if unsure what she should do next. She caught the gaze of a man by the furthest door, who cast her a smile, nodding his head, and at this the young girl stepped forwards, holding out her hands in a typical Juraian gesture of peace.

“Welcome to Yousai, Princess Sasami of Jurai.” She said softly, her tones gentle and faltering. “And to your friends, also. You are all most welcome and we... we are honoured by your visit.”

Sasami met the girl’s gaze for a moment, reading the nervous apprehension that beat inside of her, and then she smiled. She hurried forwards, gripping the other by the hands and squeezing them warmly, taking her companion completely off guard.

“You must be Lady Misao.” She said amiably. “It’s nice to meet you, too. Uncle told me that you were the same age as me.”

Misao could only stare at her, struck completely speechless by the Princess’s mode of attack, and in the silence that ensued, Seiryō and Kamidake exchanged glances, Seiryō eventually stepping forward and

bowing his head towards the startled girl and her surrounding entourage.

“Lady Misao, Councillors of Yousai, we bring the warm greetings of Azusa, Emperor of Jurai.” He said softly. “Lady Sasami has come as per your request, to bestow Tsunami’s blessing on your planet.”

Sasami released Misao’s hands, offering her another friendly smile.

“Will you show me Yousai?” She asked eagerly. “I’d love to know more about your world, Misao-sama.”

“Well...” Misao struggled to regain her composure, looking helplessly to her council guardians for guidance, and now the man by the door stepped forward, bowing respectfully towards the young Princess as he did so.

“Lady Sasami, on behalf of Lady Misao and the Councillors of this planet, allow us to reciprocate your Lord Uncle’s kind greeting.” He said soberly. “My name is Daisuke Oshima, and I am the head of the Council of Yousai and Lady Misao’s guardian. On her behalf, permit me to extend our hospitality to meet all your needs while you remain here with us.”

“You are so very kind, Lord Oshima.” Yurikage put in. “We accept your hospitality with thanks. Allow me to introduce myself — I am Lord Yurikage Motonoya, an associate of Lady Sasami and a noble representative of Jurai’s Court. My companions are Lord Seiryō Tennan, of Jurai’s Council, and official advisor to the Lady Sasami. And Kamidake, one of Tsunami’s own chosen Knights and Lady Sasami’s guardian on such voyages as this.”

“You are all most welcome.” Daisuke said gravely. “Misao-sama...”

He paused, sending his charge a meaningful glance and Misao pinkened, then dropped into a curtsy, bowing her head towards each of Sasami’s companions in turn.

“Welcome also.” She whispered.

“Lord Tennan, I believe I am familiar with your name.” A second man stepped forward, offering Seiryō a smile. “Are you the same Seiryō Tennan who was so well renowned with the Galaxy Police? My second son was also a member of this Elite body — doubtless you were acquaintances, once upon a time.”

“Indeed.” Seiryō looked surprised. “I was a Galaxy Police agent for near ten years. May I ask your name, sir? I worked with many fine agents during that time.”

“My son’s name was Asoto Hirayama.” The man’s face became shadowed. “He died in active service some months ago now. I believe I have you and the justice of Jurai’s crown to thank for the apprehension of his killer.”

“I see.” Seiryō’s expression was sombre, and he nodded. “I recall Agent Hirayama well, and was grieved by his death. You have my sympathies. He was truly a fine man and a good agent.”

Sasami bit her lip, remembering for a moment the incident that had almost cost her her own life at the hands of the vengeful Yugi, and she frowned, forcing away the images. She had heard the name Hirayama before, in conjunction with the slayings at Headquarters, but as she gazed at the Agent’s father, she felt sympathy wash over her senses.

“I am very sorry for your loss too, Lord Hirayama.” She said soberly. “The demon Yugi was a terrible enemy for all of us.”

While they had been speaking, Misao had approached her guardian, and they had exchanged a few words in low tones. Now Misao met Sasami’s gaze, a shy smile on her face as she stepped towards her guest.

“Lord Oshima and I would like to show you as much of our world as we can, if that is your wish.” She said softly. “But you must be tired and it would be rude of us not to show you to your quarters. Our people will accompany you, and if there is anything you require, please don’t hesitate to ask. We are at your service, truly.”

“Our thanks, Lady Misao.” Before Sasami could respond, Yurikage had offered the young girl a gallant smile. “Perhaps it would be as well to settle in, before we begin such complex discussions over Yousai’s spiritual future and Tsunami’s sacred blessing.”

“I will stay and speak with the Council, if you wish, Lady Sasami.” Seiryō offered. “I’m not at all tired, really, and I’m sure that I can find out anything you might need to know. You should do as Lord Motonoya and Lady Misao have suggested, and retire to your quarters. We have much work to do here, after all, and you will need all your strength for the days ahead.”

“Then I’ll come with pleasure.” Sasami nodded her head. “Kamidake, will you and Lord Motonoya speak to Azaka and tell him where we are?”

“My Lady?” Yurikage looked bewildered, and Sasami offered him a winning smile.

“It would make me very happy, if you would.” She added, and



Yurikage's eyes lit up with understanding. He smiled, warmth flickering in his eyes as he nodded his head.

"Yes, Hime-sama. I will do as you will." He agreed. "And we shall all meet again later, when you are rested."

"Misao-sama, would you come with me too?" Sasami asked the young girl eagerly, and Misao started, staring at Sasami in bemusement.

"Me?" She asked faintly. Sasami nodded.

"I'd like it if you would." She agreed. "It's such a beautiful place, but it would be nice to see it with someone my own age. Do you mind?"

Misao faltered for a moment, and Sasami saw a glance pass between her and her guardian. At Daisuke's nod, Misao's expression seemed to relax, and she offered another of her little, shy smiles.

"It would be my honour." She said, bowing her head slightly as she spoke in proper, formal tones. "If you would like to come this way, Hime-sama."

She gestured towards the door, and as if she had commanded them with words, the escort guardsmen who had been standing to attention at the various entrances and exits of the chamber sprang into life, approaching their mistress and offering their salute. Misao nodded her head to them, then indicated the corridor beyond.

"This way, Lady Sasami." She said quietly. "If you'd like to follow me."

"Of course." Sasami grasped Misao warmly by the hand, startling the young noblewoman yet again. "I'm right with you."

"Misao-sama, when you are finished attending Lady Sasami's will, I'd be pleased if you would return to me here." Daisuke said pleasantly. "We also have much to discuss, and I'm sure the Princess will have much to do herself."

"Yes, Ojisama." Misao agreed gravely. "I will do as you request."

As the door closed shut behind them, leaving both Yousai's councillors and Jurai's representatives behind, Sasami shot Misao a quizzical glance.

"Is Lord Oshima really your guardian?" She asked curiously. Misao nodded.

"Ever since my father's death, that has been the case." She agreed

simply. “He was my father’s closest friend in life, and head of the Council when my father ruled Yousai in the Emperor’s name. He trusted Daisuke-sama above all others, so when my Lord Father came to die, it seemed natural that it should be Lord Daisuke who took on my charge.”

“I’m sorry. I suppose I didn’t think about you having lost your father.” Sasami’s crimson eyes became clouded. “But I suppose that makes sense — you are Lady of Yousai now, after all.”

“It was a long time ago. I was only three or thereabouts.” Misao managed a faint smile. “I don’t remember him that much, not really. Don’t trouble yourself, Lady Sasami. You haven’t made me sad.”

“What about your mother? Is she here?”

“My mother is gone.” Misao said levelly. “I have neither of my parents, nor any brothers or sisters. I have only Lord Oshima and the Council. But they are good to me, and kind, too. They have become my family — I rely on them to teach me everything I need to know.”

“They seem kind.” Sasami nodded her head. “Though it must be a lot for you to take on all at once. I sort of know how you feel — I didn’t exactly choose to be Tsunami’s representative, but I kind of have to be. I know that sometimes you must want to stay a kid, right? But you can’t do it.”

“This is true.” Misao sighed. “But it’s quite all right. I have always known that this would be my future, after all. Yousai is my world to govern in Jurai’s name, as soon as I come of age. Now I am thirteen, the Council wish to convey certain powers into my hands... that is how it has always been on Yousai, and how it will be for me, too.”

They reached the end of the hallway, mounting a spiral stairway, and as they passed various members of the official household, several serving women dropped into the same strange curtsy Misao had offered to the Juraian envoy, back in the central chamber. Sasami eyed them for a moment, then sent Misao a questioning glance.

“Do you all do that? When you greet someone?” She asked. Misao pinkened, nodding her head.

“I suppose so.” She agreed. “It is the highest mark of respect a woman can give, to curtsy to someone when meeting them.”

“I guess that must be a Yousai thing.” Sasami said pensively. “On Jurai, we don’t do that. We just bow.”

“It’s Shizukasari.” Misao managed another of her strange little

smiles. “That is my people, Sasami-hime. The Shizukasari clan have ruled Yousai for more generations than I can count, and most of the people of Yousai are native Shizukasari themselves. It is a tradition we have always had — and though we have many settlers from Jurai and other colonies, they too have adopted our way just as we have adopted some of theirs.”

“Then you must teach me to... to curtsy.” Sasami said decidedly. “I want to know how to do it, so I can greet your Council with the same respect they’ve greeted me. It’s so much bother being a Princess as it is — I don’t want to get my etiquette totally messed up before I even start.”

“But you are a Princess of Jurai, and Tsunami-kami-sama’s representative.” Misao looked horrified. “You do not have to bow or curtsy to anyone, Lady Sasami. It is us who should bow to you — you are, after all, the niece of the Emperor, Azusa!”

“Maybe, but I want to be polite.” Sasami’s cheeks flushed pink at this. “So you will teach me, won’t you? I’d really like to learn.”

“If it is your wish.” Misao agreed doubtfully. “But truly, Hime-sama, there isn’t any need. You are our superior in name and rank. There is no need for you to conform to our ways.”

“Bah, that’s rubbish.” Sasami dismissed this with a careless gesture. “I don’t like all of that fuss, anyway.”

She beamed, meeting Misao’s confused gaze with a playful one of her own.

“After all, I hope we’re going to be friends.” She added warmly. “And how can I properly understand Yousai’s needs if I don’t understand the people who live here? I don’t know much about your planet but I’d like to, and I need you to help me understand. Tsunami can’t give her blessing without being able to reach the hearts of those she blesses, can she? I need to know and more, I want to know. Okay?”

Misao eyed Sasami hesitantly for a moment, and the Princess half-wondered if her companion thought her mad. Then the girl smiled shyly, nodding her head.

“As Lady Sasami wills it.” She said softly. “I will try my best to do as you ask.”

“So the Juraians have come back to Yousai.”

Lady Ramia sank down into one of the velvet-covered chairs the small chamber boasted, a thoughtful look on her face as she held out her hand towards the window. With a moment of hesitation, the small blue bird spread his wings, fluttering off the sill and onto her waiting fingers, ruffling his feathers as he settled himself more comfortably.

“You have been busy, Rumiya.” Ramia eyed him carefully. “Did you manage to achieve my objective? Does the Space Pirate now fly free above our heads?”

“Yes, My Lady.” Rumiya nodded his head. “But I fear...”

He faltered, then,

“I don’t believe he will be easily subjugated to your cause.”

“Well, of course not.” Ramia seemed amused at this, shaking her head slowly. “If he was easy to master, he would be of little use to me. It’s not my intention to get the Council suspicious of my actions and wishes, after all — not until the deed is done. Tell me, did you explain to the Pirate what I wanted of him? The two important stages in my plan, which only he can carry out effectively?”

“I did, but I don’t know that he drew them in.” Rumiya sighed, flexing his wings as he rose up from his mistress’s finger, morphing back into his normal human form. “Oh, that’s better. I feel like I’ve been a bird forever. I don’t think he took me very seriously, my Lady — he seemed unable to understand that his magic couldn’t harm me so long as I was under your protection. However, I think maybe I have persuaded him... at least to consider the consequences if he fails to show you obedience.”

“You have done well, then.” Ramia’s eyes glittered with approval, and she nodded her head. “And I am pleased. But nothing must be allowed to go wrong, Rumiya. I will ask you to return to Haki’s black ship once more, to ensure that my orders are properly carried out.”

“Back to Karasu?” Rumiya looked alarmed. “Must I? The whole craft stinks of blood and death and when I’m in my bird form, the stench is almost overpowering. He must have slaughtered many people aboard it — or be dead several times himself!”

“I believe the Pirate Haki has died before. Perhaps it is his own particular scent.” Ramia seemed amused at this. “But enough complaining. You know that you are bound to my will, after all. I trust that you won’t fail me, if I tell you to go? After all, you have pleased me so far. I’d hate for that to change.”

“No, my lady.” Rumiya bowed his head slightly, sighing heavily. “I

will go, when you command it.”

“Good boy.” Ramia extended a thin, pale hand, resting it gently on his shoulder. “I am happy to hear it.”

“And what of the Juraians, my Lady? Their arrival creates complications, does it not?”

“Yes, perhaps.” Ramia looked thoughtful. “I have few reasons to love Jurai, it’s true. But for the present time, they are not relevant in my schemes. Should they be slain in Haki’s assault, then all to the good — but otherwise, I don’t have much interest in them at this time. They are not many, after all.”

“No, but my Lady, it’s said that the Princess Sasami holds Tsunami’s spirit deep within her heart.” Rumiya objected. “That’s why she has come. To bless this world and free it from any memory of your time of freedom.”

“I see.” Ramia pursed her lips, considering his words carefully. “And so Tsunami comes to upset my business once again, then? Last time it was in the guise of that Prince, Azusa... and now in the form of a little girl?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Well, then things may become interesting.” Ramia flexed her hands, and for a moment, a glitter of energy passed across them. “But I doubt that they can interfere in my will. And if they do, well, I will simply take steps. They think I am helpless here, within my chamber. But I have wrought havoc from within these walls just as I did without them. I am not completely without options, after all.”

She got gracefully to her feet, moving across her chamber to the carved chest that sat on the table by the window, carefully running her finger over the lock as it glowed and clicked open. Gently and reverently she lifted the lid, and Rumiya craned forward to see the contents, letting out a faint gasp as the Lady’s hands slipped inside, pulling out several small objects. Carefully she set them down on the table in a line.

“I have more ways than just brute force to influence the will of others.” She said softly. “As well you should know, Rumiya. Or have you forgotten the day that you first came to me? An orphaned serving boy of eight or nine who made the mistake of venturing too far within the prison, and who almost fell to his death from the roof onto my balcony? Had I not healed your heart then, you would already have left this world — or had you forgotten that moment? The one where I

bound you to my will forever, in return for sparing your young life?"

She paused, then gently touched the end figure, noting Rumiya's sudden pallor with some amusement. She withdrew her finger, turning to smile at him.

"You have been obedient to my will, so you needn't fear. I have made good use of your shape-shifting potential, and I am not punishing you." She said softly. "You are in my favour, after all. My loyal eyes and ears who ventures into places I am unable to go."

Rumiya drew a shaky breath of air into his lungs, nodding his head, and Ramia eyed him playfully.

"You are a sensible boy." She added. "I do dislike betrayal above all things."

Rumiya did not respond, instead moving closer to the remaining effigies as he ran his gaze over them. One of them was badly broken, charred by Ramia's dark magic, but Rumiya still recognised the features and the distinctive dress from the portraits of the late Lord of Yousai. The remaining two figures were incomplete, and as Rumiya gazed at them, Ramia nodded her head.

"The Space Pirate will learn what it is to disobey me, and he will be brought around to my way of thinking." She said softly. "I hope you have done my other bidding also, Rumiya. Did you bring back something of his, so I can quicken his spirit inside my box of souls?"

"Yes." Rumiya seemed to gather himself, nodding his head as he slid his hand into the breast pocket of his jacket, pulling out a few small hairs. "I took these from his arm when I bit him. Will it be enough?"

"More than enough." Ramia's eyes lit up with evident delight and she took the specks of black hair carefully, engulfing them in a glow of magic as she applied them to the figurine on the table. It shimmered for a moment, then lay still, and Ramia nodded approvingly.

"The spell is complete." She announced. "When Haki completes his work for me, I will have no further use for him — but if he does well, I shall consent to release his spirit completely. Tell the Pirate this, when you see him, Rumiya. Make sure he understands that I do not play games."

"Yes, Ma'am." Rumiya nodded, his gaze falling on the second, smaller figurine. He frowned, pursing his lips.

“If you please, my Lady, who is the other doll?” He asked softly. Ramia eyed him in some amusement, running a loving finger over the creation’s visage.

“Can’t you guess?” She asked softly. “My darling daughter, of course. Lady Misao.”

“Misao?” Rumiya’s eyes lit up with horror, and Ramia nodded.

“Why else do you think I want Haki to bring her from her prison on Yousai? Here, Jurai’s charms protect her.” She said simply. “Before he left, Azusa made sure of that, so that no evil magic could touch her so long as she remained within the close confinement of Yousai’s council properties. But if she is taken from Yousai, even for a moment, I can quicken her spirit, also. She too has a part to play — after all, if not my own daughter, who else?”

“Lady Misao.” Rumiya’s eyes became troubled, and Ramia laughed.

“Did you think I merely wished to reunite myself with my child, after so many years apart?” She asked mockingly. “Please. She is a stranger to me, and I to her. Even when I was free, I saw her little beyond her birth — her father saw to that. No, Rumiya, my interests in Misao are political. She is the claimant to this planet, and through her I can achieve great things. Between us, we will hold full sway over this planet, after all. Nobody will question Lady Misao’s right to rule.”

“You won’t... hurt her, will you?” Rumiya asked hesitantly, and Ramia’s eyes opened wide in amusement.

“I do believe you have a fondness for my daughter.” She observed lightly, watching as Rumiya’s cheeks reddened in discomfort. “Ah, I thought so. Your heart is weak, Rumiya... no matter how much I try to make you strong. You serve me well, but you still lack that final ruthlessness that would make you truly strong.”

Rumiya did not respond, merely bowing his head, and Ramia rested her hands on his shoulders.

“Misao is my puppet, just as you and Haki are.” She said quietly. “So long as all goes to plan, it serves me better to keep her alive. Does that comfort you?”

“My Lady...”

“And if you obey me, also, I will have no cause to unleash my wrath on any of you.” Ramia’s gaze flitted to the figures on the table, and a flash of distress flickered across Rumiya’s expression. It was gone in an instant, however, and Ramia saw her companion’s resolve

harden.

“I will do whatever you command of me, my Lady.” He said quietly. “I will go to the black ship Karasu, and tell Haki your wishes once more.”

“Good boy.” Ramia sounded approving. “That is what I wish. Tell him that he may destroy any buildings and people he pleases, but that he must break the seal on this tower, and he must take Misao from the buildings alive. He must not kill her — if he does, I shall end his life within a split-second — regardless of how much he believes he can be reborn, my full magic can sear through the ties of life and death he and his spaceship share. Once Misao is safely away from Yousai, I will begin my spell... and then things will be fully underway.”

She turned, gesturing towards the window.

“Go, Rumiya.” She instructed. “Return to Haki and tell him my will. Even the forces of Azusa of Jurai won’t interfere in my plans to become a true Queen this time around!”



## Chapter 5

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### Chapter Five

It was almost midnight before the scientist returned to the mountain home and, as she slipped through the front door, removing her cloak and hanging it on its usual peg, she pondered over the things she had learnt that day. She had been summoned at short notice to the Space Consortium, faced by an array of anxious Earth scientists and politicians alarmed by a sudden threat on the horizon, and after a long and busy day reading scanners and checking security equipment, she too had been troubled by the result. That a ship had been shadowing the Earth seemed beyond dispute — but Washu's heart had sunk into her boots when she had picked up the craft's unique ident.

"But can it be? Or is it another of those ships foxing my equipment?" She muttered, kicking off her shoes and ferretting around for her house slippers. "I wish I knew. There were originally six Phoenix ships, after all... I thought the other five were destroyed, but then I've thought a lot of things which have proven to be wrong. I suppose I can't know for sure."

"Washu!" Before she could get any further into the house, Ryoko materialised at the end of the hallway, and at the look on her daughter's face, Washu's own expression became sombre.

"You look how I feel." She observed lightly. "What's the matter — have you been waiting up for me?"

"Yes, and you took your sweet time." Impatience flecked in Ryoko's amber eyes, but Washu knew her daughter well enough to recognise the distress in her companion's expression. "What possessed you to go babble with Earth scientists today of all days?"

"Probably the exact same thing that has you twitching." Washu sighed, finally locating her house slippers, and pulling them onto her feet. "Is everyone else in bed?"

"Yes." Ryoko agreed. "Sakura and Hiroshi are still here, also. I said I'd wait up to speak to you — I wasn't going to sleep, anyway. But what do you mean, the same thing? Washu, spill. What do you know?"

Washu eyed her daughter keenly.

“Haki was here this afternoon, wasn’t he?” She asked softly, and Ryoko bit her lip.

“It was him?” She whispered. “Dammit!”

“It looks that way.” Washu agreed, taking the other girl by the arm and leading her into the sitting room. “The Consortium called me because the scanners I’d helped install were picking up unidentified ship information, and they were a bit alarmed by the way the craft was circling the Earth. When I read through the data, the information looked very familiar to me. I was pretty sure it was Karasu — but the craft didn’t try and break through the security shield. It just headed back out into space. They calmed down when I told them that — but I’m not at all as calm about it as they are. They don’t know the ship like I do, after all — I doubt that much could keep Haki away from the Earth, if he so chose.”

Ryoko glanced at her hands.

“Ryo Ohki picked up the same thing, when we were at the beach.” She admitted quietly. “I hoped that it could have been some kind of mistake... but I know that Ryo Ohki’s sensors aren’t usually wrong. I didn’t see a ship, but there was something ominous — a dark energy, somewhere. But like you said, it went away. That’s what confused me most — if Haki has got free somehow, why did he stop? Surely he’d come to kill Tenchi and I, if he knew we were on the Earth?”

“That is confusing.” Washu nodded. “Unless he didn’t know you were here, and just happened to circle the planet, on the off-chance. He might have passed you by completely... in which case, there’s probably nothing to worry about.”

“You know as well as I do that that’s a bunch of crap.” Ryoko glanced up sharply, and Washu could see the clouded, troubled look in her daughter’s eyes. “Haki is not the kind of man who gives up. He’ll hold a grudge forever, and he likes blood. If he really has managed to free himself from subspace, then I can’t imagine he’d give up on me that easily. He still wants the Dark Heart, unless I’m misjudging his obsessive nature. And since I had the Dark Heart the last time we met, well, he’s going to hunt me down one way or another. When he learns the gems no longer exist...”

She faltered, and Washu saw real fear cross her companion’s expression. Her eyes softened, and she placed a gentle hand on Ryoko’s shoulder.

“We won’t let him kill you, you know.” She said softly. “Do you think Tenchi would stand for that? He and you have both become

much stronger since the last time you fought Haki, and I'm not exactly helpless myself. If we sealed him in subspace once, we must be able to do it again. Don't look so worried, Ryoko — we won't let him have his way."

Ryoko laughed humourlessly.

"It's stupid, isn't it? That I should be so rattled by this?" She murmured. "I don't totally understand it myself. I mean, I've always hated Haki. Feared him, to some degree. I saw enough of his way of dealing with enemies to know what kind of a person he'd be to cross. But I... I really don't want to die, that's all. I have way too much to lose. And I don't want to put other people in danger, because they're people I care about. It was different, the last time. I didn't really feel I had those things to lose. I still believed Tenchi was in love with Ayeka, and that my fate didn't really matter. But it's not that way now. Tenchi and I have a future together, and I like my life here on the Earth. I don't want him to barge in and wreck it... for any of us."

"Ryoko." Washu eyed her daughter for a moment, then she smiled, slipping an arm around her companion's shoulders and hugging her tightly. "Listen to me. You are a formidable fighter, when all is said and done. Haki is strong, but I really think that between us all, we're stronger."

Ryoko sighed, resting her head against her mother's shoulders, and Washu shot her a startled look. Then she grinned.

"I should speak to Ryo Ohki." She said pragmatically. "See what exactly she sensed."

"Yume tried to hack through the police scanners, but she hasn't found anything." Ryoko raised her gaze to her companion. "I don't know if that's because there's nothing to find, or because she doesn't know all the things you do about hacking. Either way, she hasn't dug up any more information — we really don't know what happened. I thought it wasn't possible for him to break out of subspace, or to break the spell we all put over him... but somehow it seems he has. What if he's become stronger, too?"

"Or he had help." Washu said grimly. Ryoko snorted.

"Who would help Haki?" She demanded. "Even his former guild hate him and want his corpse strung up somewhere for good. I can't imagine anyone aligning themselves with someone like him."

"Nevertheless, we have to consider the possibility that someone has." Washu reasoned. "Because as you say, it's unlikely he could free

himself from both the spell and the location on his own. I think he must have had help of some nature.”

Ryoko sighed.

“I like this less and less, the more we discuss it.” She said at length, getting to her feet and moving to the window. “I feel like he’s stalking me, somehow. That he’s watching me... but he isn’t making a move. That gets me as edgy as anything else. At least if he came down here, well, we could get it all over with and I’d know whether we stood a chance against him. I’m half-tempted to take Ryo Ohki up and go looking for him, if you want to know.”

“No.” Washu shook her head. “Not on your own, and not until we know more. You said yourself that you have too much to lose to go doing crazy, suicidal things like challenging powerful pirates to single combat. No, you stay here, for the time being. We need more information.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Ryoko sighed again.

“You really are bothered by this, aren’t you?” Washu eyed her keenly. Ryoko nodded, looking surprised.

“Of course. Wouldn’t you be?”

“Well, yes. But I’ve never known you to fight against my suggestions so little, that’s all. It’s almost worrying.”

Ryoko looked stricken for a moment, then she shrugged, offering an ironic smile.

“I guess I am scared.” She said frankly. “More scared than I like... it makes me angry. But in some ways, I think you understand more than the others. People have threatened your life before, haven’t they? You know what it’s like to be stalked by an enemy.”

“Yes, I do.” Washu agreed gently. “But I also know what it’s like to see that enemy finally defeated. Have a little faith, Ryoko, and don’t rush into anything on impulse. Let me see what data I can glean first. I’ll put a call through to Headquarters — see what Kiyone and Mihoshi might have heard.”

“No.” Ryoko shook her head.

“No?” Washu looked surprised.

“I don’t want them brought into this.” Ryoko said firmly. “Kiyone will think that she has to get involved, and I don’t want either of them caught in the crossfire. If Haki is loose, he’s not the kind of person

ordinary Galaxy Police should be worrying about. He's killed many of those before, remember, and he has no particular fondness for them as an organisation. It's bad enough that he's flitting around the Earth. We won't bring Miho-Kiyo into it if we can keep them out."

"On balance, you might be right." Washu admitted. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but we've seen adequate evidence of Kiyone's determination over the last few months. She's not someone who would stay out of it if we just asked her to. But if Karasu's ident hits the scanners, we might not be able to prevent their involvement."

"Then make sure that Haki's ship doesn't reach the scanners." Ryoko said quietly. "If he's got issues, we'll deal with them. It's probably me he'll want, after all."

Washu was silent for a moment, then she nodded.

"All right." She agreed. "I see the sense in what you're saying, and I'll do as you suggest."

"I might take Ryo Ohki up in any case. See if I can find out anything from some of my old pirate associates." Ryoko glanced at her fingers. "After all, if he's around, someone must have seen or heard something."

"Ryoko, promise me you won't charge off into space looking for him."

"I promise." Ryoko nodded. "I was only going to ask a few questions. I'm really not in that much of a hurry to renew our acquaintance."

"Good." Washu looked approving. "And right now, you should head to bed. Get some sleep. I'll take over the scanners from Yume and see what I can discover — but you look shattered. Flying through space can wait till you're more alert."

"I don't know if I can sleep." Ryoko admitted. "But I am tired. Maybe you're right."

"Now I know I'm worried." Washu bantered, and Ryoko grimaced at her.

"Stop it." She instructed. "Don't tease me. I'm too worked up."

"All right." Washu relented. "But listen, Ryoko. If we can stop this, we will. And don't think any of us are going to let him just come and pick you off, okay? You're not on your own against him — this time or ever. Right?"

Ryoko managed a faint smile, nodding her head.

“All right.” She said softly. “Thanks, Washu. Good night.”

With that she faded out of view, and Washu sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen her like that before.” She murmured, getting to her feet and heading slowly out of the living room towards the door of her lab. “And I don’t like it. Haki is a formidable opponent, we all know that — but Ryoko has issues with him that run deeper. I’m sure she remembers being a child aboard his ship and all the things she must have seen during that time. It’s concerning that she’s so willing to listen to me — that shows more than anything that she’s freaked out by the possibility of his resurrection. And I don’t think I can blame her. Whatever else we do, if Haki really is after Ryoko and the Dark Heart again, well, we’ll have to make sure he fails.”

“I’ve never been to Yousai before this trip, you know.”

Sasami leant on the fine wooden railing of the balcony, gazing out across the horizon at the busy, bustling city that flourished with life and energy below them. “I wasn’t sure what it would be like, Misao-chan — but I’m glad that I came here. You’ve all been so friendly to us, and it really is a pretty place to be. Different from Jurai — but just as special.”

“Do you really think so?”

Misao gazed at her companion in surprise, a pensive expression touching her aqua eyes. “I suppose so. I’ve never travelled away from here, so I wouldn’t know. The Council are very protective of me... they don’t want me to risk going very far.”

“I know the feeling.” Sasami said fervently. “My father is just as protective of me. I guess it’s just because they care about you, though — I mean, your father would want you to be well looked after, I’m sure. They’re only doing what he would do, if he was here.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Misao’s eyes became thoughtful. “Your father must be very proud of you, Sasami-hime. Being Tsunami’s chosen one, and doing all these good things for people such as us.”

“I don’t know about that.” Sasami shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, yeah, he’s proud of me and he loves me but I don’t think it’s because of Tsunami. He and Mother have always been supportive of both Ayeka and I — too supportive maybe, from time to time. But they

mean well. I wouldn't swap them."

"You're so lucky." Misao sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "I wish I had an older sister. It can be so lonely here. I don't have many friends. Or, well, any, really."

"Not at all?" Sasami's eyes became soft as she regarded her companion. "That's sad. Won't the Council let you mix?"

"They're too afraid of letting me far from these walls." Misao said wistfully. "But it's probably for the best. I don't think I'd know what to say to anyone if they did want to be friends with me. I... I'm not very good with people."

"Well, *we're* friends now, aren't we?" Sasami asked. Misao looked startled.

"Sasami-hime?"

"Well, aren't we?" Sasami gripped her companion playfully by the hands, squeezing them tightly. "I'd like it if we were. You and I are the same age, after all. And even if we do live on different planets, we're both still citizens of Jurai in the end, aren't we?"

"I suppose we are." A slight smile touched Misao's lips. "Yes, Sasami-hime. I'd like that. I'd like it very much — if we were friends. You're so kind... I heard that you were, but it's really true. I didn't know what it would be like, to meet a Princess."

"You don't have to call me Hime. In fact, I'd rather you didn't." Sasami shook her head, thick waves of hair flying every which way as she did so. "I'm called that by enough people, but never by people I consider my friends, except in super ultra formal situations. Besides, I've already started calling you Misao-chan... or if you like, I could make it Mi-chan. What do you think?"

"Mi...?" Misao stared, then she offered another shy smile.

"I don't mind. Whatever you like." She said. "And if you're really sure, then... then I won't call you Princess. But won't your associates think me rude, if I don't?"

"Not at all." Sasami dismissed it with a flick of her fingers. "They'll know that we're friends and that's all it is. Besides, Kamidake is here, remember. He's our witness, so if anyone questions you, he can set them straight."

Misao turned to glance at the knight who had settled himself at a respectful distance along the balcony, and she smiled.

“Is he your bodyguard?” She asked hesitantly. Sasami pinkened slightly, nodding her head.

“Sort of.” She agreed. “He and Azaka are Tsunami’s men, really. Appointed by the Goddess herself, not by me. But I love them both dearly, Mi-chan. Almost like... well, like family, really. They’re more friends to me than anything else. I wouldn’t want to travel anywhere without them.”

“That must be nice.” Misao looked thoughtful. “Jurai sounds like such a lovely, friendly place. Maybe one day I will visit it, when I’m older. But right now everything is a bit strange. They want me to start making decisions in my own right, even though I don’t feel old enough. They will guide me, of course, but it’s all so frightening. I’m glad you came to bless the shrines and all of us. I know that Father believed in Tsunami-kami-sama and her power... he would want us to do this.”

“Then I’m glad I’m here too.” Sasami squeezed her companion’s hand again, turning her gaze back towards the city. “Shinoshi has so many lights, you know. Twinkling from every window — it looks welcoming and homey, now that the sun is starting to set. Like a whole field of light, spread out for miles around. I can see how it got its name.”

“That depends on which name you mean.” Misao looked troubled, uttering a heavy sigh. Sasami frowned.

“I thought that it was just called Shinoshi. The Harmonious New City, Yousai’s central city.” She said, confused. “Does it have another name, then?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter.” Misao shook her head. “It’s just that some of the locals call it... something else. That’s all. It’s not important.”

Sasami frowned, taking in the sudden tension in her companion’s demeanour, and she tilted her head, eying the other girl curiously.

“If it upsets you, I won’t ask questions.” She said softly. “I don’t want to make you sad, Mi-chan. I’m sorry if I said something I shouldn’t,”

“No, it isn’t you.” Misao seemed to rouse herself from her reverie, offering the Princess a smile. “You didn’t say anything at all, I promise. I was just thinking for a moment. That’s all.”

“About anything in particular?”



“Yes.” Misao nodded slowly. She moved across to the furthest edge of the balcony, gesturing out towards a dark silhouette that loomed over the water’s edge, surrounded as it was by carved wooden pillars and a glittering blueish light.

“Do you see that?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful.” Sasami nodded. “What is it?”

“Nothing beautiful, I’m afraid.” Misao glanced at her fingers. “That’s Tounochi.”

“Tounochi?”

“Yes.” Misao leant against the railing, the wind whipping through her dark hair as she frowned, drawing her brows together. “The Tower of Blood. Inside that tower, an evil spirit is imprisoned — or so the stories say. Ten years ago, she ravaged this city, and brought about the deaths of hundreds of people — councillors and commoners alike. She sought to gain control of the city, but my father sealed her up inside the tower and that is where she stays. The effort of trapping her cost him his life — and he needed the help of your family to complete the spell. Now a mixture of Shizukasari magic and Jurai magic holds her firm.”

“I see.” Sasami stared at the tower with new interest, feeling a prickle of anticipation run up her spine. “I wouldn’t have guessed. It looks so pretty and mystical, with all those lights. I didn’t imagine that they were caused by a magical seal.”

“Yes.” Misao agreed. “One that was put in place by Jurai’s Emperor... your Uncle, Lord Azusa.”

“I didn’t know.” Sasami’s eyes became pensive. “It doesn’t seem like anything so bad could ever happen in this pretty city.”

“Well, many people still remember what happened as if it was yesterday.” Misao responded softly. “Most families lost someone, when it happened. So they call it... they call it the City of Death. Shinoshi... isn’t such a harmonious haven to everyone on Yousai.”

“Shinoshi.” Sasami murmured. “Oh, how sad!”

“It’s just how it is.” Misao bit her lip, looking troubled. “I hope that it won’t mean you decide to leave Yousai sooner, Sasami.”

“Of course not.” Sasami shook her head. “I’m here because your Council asked me to come, and I haven’t done anything that you asked of me yet. Besides, just because something bad happened when you and I were little kids, it doesn’t mean something bad is going to

happen now. I like this planet and I want to see more of it, Mi-chan. Promise me you'll show me as much as you can, before I leave? I love seeing new worlds and meeting new people."

Misao's eyes lit up with hope at this, and she nodded her head.

"I promise, if I can." She agreed. "I'd like that too. I don't often get to show people my planet!"

## Chapter 6

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### Chapter Six

So, not everything in space had changed in his absence.

Haki lifted the chipped glass to his lips, allowing the potent amber liquid to seep through the gauzy cloth that hid his lower face from view. He drained it in one fell swoop, clattering the vessel down onto the table with a thud as he surveyed his surroundings with a mixture of derision and comfortable pleasure.

It had been a long time, he mused, since he had been able to drink in pirate company, but even despite the fact he had been sealed away in subspace, he had achieved the same reaction upon his arrival as he always had. Those pirates sensible enough of his reputation to recognise him on sight had withdrawn to a safe distance, dragging their more brave or foolish companions with them, and the barman's hands had shaken as he'd mixed Haki's drink, as if frightened of getting the proportions wrong. The shock and alarm on the faces of his cohorts had amused the pirate more than anything, and he glanced at his battle-scarred hands, clenching and flexing his fingers absently as he did so.

Yes, he truly was as fearsome as ever.

"I've been looking for you all over the place."

The voice startled him, and he glanced up, tensing as he prepared to launch an attack on anyone who had dared to interrupt his musings. As his gaze rested on his companion, however, he let out a groan of frustration, banging his fist down on the table.

"Why don't you leave me alone!" He demanded. "I didn't ask for you to follow me through space! I thought we'd already settled our business."

"Lady Ramia asked me to return, to make sure you fully understood her position, and yours." Rumiya flexed his azure wings, settling them more comfortably on his back as he tightened his perch on the back of the opposing seat. "Believe me, it's not my choice to be here any more than it is yours."

"Well, get to the point." Haki said bad-temperedly. "I'm in the mood to rip off a bird's head, so you'd better not spend too much time

around me.”

“Do I have to go through that with you again?” Rumiya seemed impatient. “What are you even doing here, anyway? You don’t have time to act on your own whims. Not when Lady Ramia is waiting for you to carry out her bidding!”

“I told you once, you stupid parrot, I’m not someone who takes orders well.” Haki’s blue eyes glinted with annoyance. “I might come to raid this Yousai planet of yours, and I might not. On balance, what have I to gain from destroying that place? I don’t see what’s in it for me.”

“Your life.” Rumiya said succinctly. “Ramia-sama told me that I was to ensure you understood exactly what your position was. Try to defy her, and you’ll regret it... if you don’t believe me, try and lay a hand on me right now. You’ll see how powerful her magic is, and how much you truly are under her control.”

“I’m not under anyone’s control, bird-boy.” Haki growled, reaching a thick fist across the table to grasp the bird around the throat. As soon as his fingers brushed against Rumiya’s feathers, however, a strange red light burst forth from the beads around his throat, burning through him and he gasped for breath, loosing his grip on Rumiya as he struggled to regain his composure. Rumiya chuckled, ruffling his feathers back into place.

“Now you see.” He said softly. “She has been lenient on you so far, but Lady Ramia holds your soul prisoner within her Tower. If you defy her, she will kill both you and the Black Ship in which you fly. She has the power to rip your souls apart and destroy them both, because she holds yours in her hands.”

Haki drew breath into his lungs, eying the bird with hate.

“And if I choose to follow her request, what then? What happens to me when I’m no longer of use to her?” He demanded. “I’m not going back to subspace!”

“Ramia-sama says that if you do well, she will release your soul from the Juraian spell.” Rumiya said quietly. “Once she is released from her prison, she will have the power to break the hold over you completely. You will be free once again, to roam the universe. I told you, the spell she has used to revive you is threefold. She gives you life, you give her fidelity... and in the end, you gain your freedom. Do you understand now? You cannot challenge the will of a mage of Ramia-sama’s strength — but it is not in your interests to try. She’s not your enemy, after all. And think of what you can do, when you

have fulfilled her wishes. You said you had revenge to take on someone — don't you want to have that chance?"

"I'd like to rip Ryoko's head from her shoulders right now." Haki muttered, and Rumiya flexed his wings thoughtfully.

"Lady Ramia says you must put your petty vengeance attempts aside until you have fulfilled her quest." He said warningly. "She will not tolerate deviation. You won't be freed until she is, so remember that. You will have time enough after to pursue your own ends."

Haki was silent for a moment, his glittering eyes narrowing to mere slits as he ran over all of the possibilities in his mind. At length, he nodded.

"Destroy this tower and set your witch free." He said slowly. "That I can do, though don't think I will be careful about it. If she is caught in the blast, that's her problem. When I raid, I raid to kill. I don't care who gets caught in the crossfire."

"Lady Ramia can protect herself." Rumiya assured him. "And you are at liberty to destroy anything and anyone else on the planet in your attack. The only thing that Lady Ramia asks is that you take her daughter a hostage when you attack."

"A hostage?" Haki's brows knitted together. "I don't take prisoners. I kill them."

"Lady Ramia requires this one to be kept alive... she instructed me to tell you that if any harm befell the girl, she'd extinguish you in a heartbeat." Rumiya said frankly. "And she does not lie. I have seen for myself the vessel in which she holds your soul. A single blast from her magic and you will be no more."

There was a long silence, then,

"The girl's name?"

"Misao. She is the Lady of Yousai."

"And how looks she, this Misao?"

"She has thick dark hair, the colour of midnight, and vivid aqua eyes that sparkle like seawater." Rumiya said seriously. Haki's expression became one of derision and amusement.

"You like this brat, I think, bird-boy."

"I follow Lady Ramia's requests. Not my own." Rumiya said stiffly. "And that is not your concern. You have your instructions. Take the girl and bring her far from Yousai."

“And then what? Will you be waiting, to take her to some safe, secret haven?”

“Ramia-sama’s orders are just to bring her far from Yousai, and leave her someplace she is easily found.” Rumiya said quietly. “That is all. Once this is done, you will be free.”

Haki gazed around him thoughtfully, taking in the busy, bustling bar. At length he nodded.

“I shall bring her here.” He said finally. “Tell your Lady that I accept her terms. But that she had better fulfill her part of the bargain. I have more important things to do than follow the whims of witches.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like we’re about to have another alien invasion just at the moment.”

Hiroshi slipped his hands into his pocket, gazing up at the clear blue sky with a rueful grin. “In fact, I think the worst we can expect is an attack of sunstroke. It’s hot, that’s for sure — but I don’t see dark ships looming out of the black waiting to jump on us.”

“Do you suppose Ryoko will be all right, Tenchi?” Sakura cast her companion an anxious look. “She did seem wound up, and she left very early this morning. If there’s really a danger, do you think she should have gone on her own?”

“I think that she’ll do what she has to do.” Tenchi ran his fingers through his thick dark hair with a sigh. “But she did promise Washu not to go running into danger. I guess she has to get it out of her system — find out what she can, then she’ll come back. At least, I hope so. She can be impulsive, but sometimes I just have to trust her. And in the meantime, we need to stock up on food supplies. We’re running low on a lot of things... so for the time being, let’s not worry about pirates or black ships on the horizon.”

Sakura looked thoughtful, casting her friend a pensive glance, but she made no further remark. It was the next day, and after an uneasy night’s rest the pirate had taken Ryo Ohki and left the mountains, heading into space in search of clues. It had just been the three of them at breakfast, which Sakura had volunteered to cook herself, since Yume and Washu had been closeted away in the lab, Noboyuke had already left for work in the city and Katsuhito had been preoccupied at the shrine.

“Well, I guess shopping is something we all have to do from time to time. Even when you live with aliens.” She said reflectively at length.

“And since Hiroshi and I are still around, we might as well do our bit. Are you sure you want us still here, Tenchi, with all this going on? I mean, I don’t pretend to understand half of what is — but I don’t want us to get in your way.”

“Actually, it’s a relief having you both.” Tenchi admitted. “A fleck of normality in the madness, or something. And I appreciate the help today, too. My mind is on Ryoko, and I know what Yume will say if I come home with all the wrong things.”

“You know, Tenchi, I was thinking about this whole thing last night.” Hiroshi remarked, as they headed up the main street of Kurashiki’s busy shopping district, pausing occasionally to glance at notices in shop windows. “About this pirate ship that Ryoko said she thought was shadowing us.”

“What about it?” Tenchi cast his friend a startled glance. “Did you see something too, Ikeda?”

“No, of course not.” Hiroshi shook his head. “That’s sort of my point, actually. Ryoko seemed pretty sure there was something there, but when that robot cook woman went hunting for information, she didn’t find anything, did she? Nobody saw this ship at all, not even Ryoko. And she said herself that this pirate guy of hers was the kind of person to kill first and ask questions later. So what if he was never there at all? I mean, we’re all still quite fine and safe here. No aliens on the horizon. What if she imagined it?”

“Ryo Ohki picked it up too, remember.” Tenchi pointed out. Hiroshi grimaced.

“Ryo Ohki is a cat.” He said succinctly. “Whether Ryoko can talk to her or not, she’s still a cat.”

“Tenchi said she was a spaceship, too.” Sakura objected. “Ikeda, things aren’t always the same when you add Ryoko’s world to the equation. Just because we’ve never seen Ryo Ohki be anything other than small and fuzzy, it doesn’t mean she isn’t.”

“I find it hard to believe that anyone goes flying in a small, furry creature that eats carrots as if there’s a national shortage.” Hiroshi objected. “How many spaceships do you know who burrow their way into cupboards in search of carrot cake in the middle of the night?”

“None, but then I don’t know many spaceships, so it’s sort of a redundant question.” Sakura spread her hands. “If Tenchi says she’s a ship, I’ll believe him. He knows better than me, after all.”

“He’s also off in a world of his own.” Hiroshi nudged Tenchi with

his elbow, startling his friend back to alertness.

“Huh? Something up?” He asked. Hiroshi sighed, pulling another face at his friend.

“Just the fact that you seem to be spacing out again.” He said frankly. “We might be helping you shop, but we’re not doing it all for you. Wake up, huh? Ryoko can take care of herself. We all know that.”

“Yes. Maybe.” Tenchi sighed. “All right. You’re right. I should trust in her strength.”

“Masaki...” Hiroshi sent his friend a pensive look, and Tenchi frowned, eying him curiously.

“Yes? Something on your mind, Ikeda-kun?”

“Well...” Hiroshi pursed his lips. “Something else occurred to me last night, that’s all... about you and Ryoko and all this mental stuff.”

“Such as?”

“In the last year or so, Sakura and I have both gotten to know your fiancée pretty damn well.” Hiroshi said slowly. “Ryoko is the life and soul of any party. She dives right on in, and she’s not afraid to take a chance. She also drinks more than anyone I know, and eats as if there’s a famine due.”

“What about it?” Tenchi’s brows knitted together. “I don’t follow.”

Hiroshi bit down on his lip for a moment, then,

“She really didn’t eat that much last night.” He said quietly.

“Well, she was probably worried about this alien ship. After what she said, I was, too.” Sakura pointed out. Hiroshi spread his hands.

“The alien ship that noone can actually find any trace of.” He reminded them. “Belonging to the man who was trapped in an impossible prison and who would slaughter people rather than just drift past on the horizon, leaving his signal out there for all to see.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Tenchi looked confused. “Ikeda, if you have a point, could you just make it? Sakura’s right — Haki’s ship has Ryoko on edge. What else is there to be said about it?”

“None of it makes any sense, even to an Earthling like me.” Hiroshi said succinctly. “This pirate hasn’t tried to kill anyone, noone has found any trace of him except Ryoko’s cat, and let’s not forget that Ryoko is the only one who claims to understand what that critter says. So we only have her word for it.”



“You think she’s making it up?” Sakura’s eyes became wide with surprise. “Why would she do something like that?”

“Well, I wondered for a long time last night, and I came up with a theory about that.” Hiroshi said pensively.

“Ryoko wouldn’t make something like this up.” Tenchi objected. “Ikeda, she wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Well, I sort of thought you might be in on it. That it all might be some kind of, well, elaborate excuse to hide what’s really going on.” Hiroshi admitted. “When you think about it... she’s been edgy and jumpy, and not really herself. She was up early this morning — which from what you’ve said, she never is voluntarily. She didn’t eat last night, and she skipped out on breakfast this morning. All those things are suspicious in their own right.”

Sakura sighed heavily.

“Where is this going?” She asked. Hiroshi looked uncomfortable, eying his friend for a moment. Then,

“I guess what I’m asking, Masaki, is that she isn’t... I mean, you didn’t...” He faltered, and Tenchi stared at him.

“She isn’t what, Ikeda-kun?”

“Well, you and she have been shacking up in Osaka all year long, so far.” Hiroshi scratched his head awkwardly. “The girl isn’t pregnant, is she?”

“*Pregnant?*” Tenchi’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Hiroshi shrugged.

“Just a question.” He said hastily. “I mean, honestly, she’s a pretty girl, and you’re only human, right? You and she must have... being alone in that flat and all... and considering everything...”

“Ikeda, stop being so crass.” Sakura scolded, as Tenchi stared at his friend, struck speechless. “Tenchi and Ryoko’s relationship isn’t any of your business. Maybe if you got a girlfriend of your own, you’d stop obsessing about his!”

“I’m not obsessing! I’m looking out for a friend!” Hiroshi held up his hands, looking indignant. “Babies are expensive, and Tenchi’s still in college!”

“Being nosy, more like it.”

“Well, you’re just being naive.” Hiroshi objected. “Reality check for you, Ito-san. Tenchi’s an adult male, Ryoko’s a very hot adult female.

They're engaged to be married, and spending half of term time living together. Who knows what they might have gotten up to in the meantime? It's our duty as good friends to be there if we're needed, that's all!"

"Or to pry into their private lives?"

"If necessary, yes." Hiroshi nodded unrepentantly. "Masaki, you know you can tell us, if that is it. I mean, you can trust us, right? You don't need to spin crazy stories about spaceships — we're not going to freak out. And well..."

"Stop it, the both of you!" Tenchi exclaimed at that moment, holding up his hands.

"Masaki, you know you can tell us the truth." Hiroshi said quietly. "I mean, well, it's a lot less far-fetched than some ghost ship that doesn't seem to exist, and..."

"*Ryoko is not pregnant!*" Tenchi cut across him, his cheeks red with embarrassed indignation. "I can't believe you'd even think that she was! This whole thing is serious — don't you get it? This isn't some soap opera, and Ryoko didn't imagine whatever it was at the beach! She's a seasoned space traveller, and Ryo Ohki has highly sensitive sensory equipment. If they say there was a ship there, there was a ship there. Regardless of whether we can find it or not, it was real. And as for her being pregnant, do you really think we'd be that careless? Give me some credit for responsibility, will you! Just because we're going to get married does not mean that I'm trying to start a family before I'm even out of college!"

Silence greeted his outburst, as several passers-by paused to gape, before shuffling on away from the trio of students at some speed. Sakura bit her lip, putting her hand on Tenchi's shoulder.

"Listen, Tenchi-kun." She said softly. "Ikeda's a moron. That's all there is to it. Don't let him rile you up."

"I'm not a moron!" Hiroshi objected. "I was just being a concerned friend! And I'm sorry, I find it much easier to believe in a hushed up sordid secret than I do a spaceship floating around the Earth all of a sudden."

Tenchi sighed heavily.

"Ryoko is not pregnant." He repeated wearily. "Listen. I know that this isn't a side you often see of Ryoko and my world, but this isn't the first time we've been wrapped up in things that seem a bit beyond ordinary comprehension. And I know that it's natural for you to look

for ordinary, Earth solutions to things... but they don't always apply to us. Try and understand that, okay?"

"Besides, there's no reason to suppose that Tenchi and Ryoko even can have kids." Sakura pointed out. "Being that they're from different planets, basically. Get your brain out of the gutter, Hiroshi. Tenchi is right. We don't understand a lot of these things, and it's time we tried. After all, they're our friends, and we owe them that much."

"Ryoko and I can have children." Tenchi said absently. "But it's not on the agenda right at the moment."

"How in hell would you know that, if you hadn't been discussing the matter?" Hiroshi looked startled.

"Because our daughter came back from the future one time to help us exorcise a demon spirit from a possessed Jurai tree." Tenchi said frankly. Hiroshi stared at him for a moment, then he snorted.

"Now you're winding me up." He said flatly. "All right, already. I get it. Ryoko isn't pregnant. Fine. There might be a spooky black ship somewhere out there. But it hasn't attacked anyone — is all this panic really necessary?"

"Ryoko was upset last night. And she did say she was with this man when she was just a child." Sakura remembered. "Maybe he hurt her somehow. We don't know, Hiroshi... she might have been scarred by the experience."

"No doubt in my mind that he hurt her, although she doesn't really talk to me about Haki very much." Tenchi sighed heavily. "It's a part of her life she doesn't like remembering. A friend of ours once suggested they had been lovers, and Ryoko clean went for her at the bare idea. I don't know what passed between them — whether he beat her, or used her in other ways to further his schemes. I just know that when his ship was originally destroyed, she gained the freedom to be a pirate on her own terms. That's the life she tends to talk about more, when we discuss her piracy. I think she truly is afraid of Haki, possibly more so than she is of anyone else we've ever fought. As Sakura said, she was just a child. It's bound to stick in her mind far more for that reason."

"Then I guess she's overreacting for that reason?" Hiroshi asked. Tenchi nodded.

"But she may not be overreacting. She might be being sensible, in covering all bases and finding out what she can." He replied. "Even I don't understand half of the things she does about the threats in space."

I might have been to Jurai a few times and even fought their battles for them. But I'm still a rookie in the world of space travel... she knows a lot more than I do, even now."

"That cat of hers really is a spaceship, huh?"

"Yes." Tenchi agreed. "And since Ryoko has left with her, there's nothing we can really do but wait for her to return. I don't have a ship and I haven't the first idea how to fly even Ryo Ohki. Washu is the only other one who has any control over that craft — but even she's not as good a pilot as Ryoko is. I'm sure she will come back just fine — but I can't help worrying about her. She does attract trouble, and there has been more than one occasion where she's gone out on some mission or other and wound up abducted or hurt."

"She said there were a lot of forces in the universe stronger than her... it's hard to imagine, and a little bit scary." Sakura remembered. "But I suppose there's still a lot of things we on the Earth have to learn about deep space, isn't there?"

"Yes. And a lot of it, I hope you'll never have to see." Tenchi said grimly.

"Was she really telling the truth, when she said she was the illegitimate daughter of some Prince, then? That was real, too?" Hiroshi demanded. Tenchi inclined his head slightly.

"Kagato was a Prince of Jurai, sure enough." He agreed. "But he tried to use dark magic to steal the throne. I wouldn't say there was ever any love lost between him and Ryoko... they were relatives, but only through blood."

"Then when we first met her, and she said that her father had recently died..." Sakura frowned.

"That was true." Tenchi nodded. "Kagato was vanquished and his threat destroyed not long before you guys first met my girlfriend."

"Freakish." Hiroshi pursed his lips. "This whole thing gets weirder by the minute."

"Yes, and none of it is getting our shopping done." Tenchi agreed grimly. "Come on, you guys. Yume will be wondering where we are, and I don't want to cause them any more worry at home than they already have to deal with, now Ryoko's out in space!"

## Chapter 7

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### Chapter Seven

“And so that is the basic outline of our request, Lady Sasami.”

Daisuke paused to cast the Princess a smile, spreading the map out more clearly before them on the table. “It’s not a lot of travelling — fortunately all of Tsunami’s Yousai-based shrines were built originally in an arc around the place this city was to inhabit, so it shouldn’t take you more than a day’s progress to cross all of the boundaries. Is there anything that we can do, to facilitate the process? As you are probably aware, Shinoshi has suffered from warfare in the past. We’re eager to put that memory behind us, in light of Misao-sama’s coming of age.”

“I think you’ve done enough already, Lord Oshima.” Sasami said pensively. “Tsunami will have to do the rest, and I’m the only one she can act through. So that’s what we’ll do. The shrines really aren’t so far apart... I thought they might be all over the planet, but they’re really not.”

“There are few Shizukasari settlements beyond the boundaries of Shinoshi, which spreads for some miles as it is.” Daisuke explained. “Most of the other settlements on this planet are heathen, but are left to themselves to practice their own faiths. So long as they don’t challenge the will of the Council and of Jurai, and they pay their tithes, we let them alone. They are peaceful, nomadic peoples, generally. And settlers from outside of our boundaries.”

He smiled.

“Your Lord Uncle was agreeable to such an arrangement, when he was last with us.” He added. “So I hope you won’t be offended by such things.”

“Of course not.” Sasami shook her head. “And nor will Tsunami. Don’t worry. We’re here just to do what you ask of us. Not to judge you.”

“Lady Sasami, we might manage to reach the nearest shrine today.” Seiryō peered over Sasami’s shoulder, glancing at the map, then nodding his head. “If I’m reading the coordinates right, it’s positioned just a little to the south of this complex. I think we should be able find it easily enough — and then you’d have one less to worry about on the morrow. I think Lord Oshima said there were seven shrines in all.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Sasami agreed. “All right, Lord Tennan. That’s what we’ll do.”

“Shall I call transportation for you?” Daisuke asked. “We have many shuttle-cars that can run all around the city, and they’d get you there in no time at all. Some are exclusively for the use of our Council — it would be no trouble to charter one for you and your companions to ride in, my Lady.”

“Thank you.” Sasami nodded her head. “I’d like to walk, but it might take us longer to get there, and I don’t want to tire everyone out traipsing across a strange city.”

“We will all accompany the Lady Sasami, of course, to help her carry out her mission.” Yurikage put in at that moment from his position near the chamber’s entrance. “It is our duty to make sure the Princess is never out of our sight for long, after all, and we are all subjects of Tsunami.”

“Lord Motonoya.” Sasami hesitated, then nodded her head. “You’re right. We will all go — Lord Oshima, would it be possible for Lady Misao to accompany us, also? I’d like someone from Yousai to be with us.”

“Lady Misao is not able to leave the Council complex at present.” After exchanging looks with the Council Leader, it was Lord Hirayama who spoke, shaking his head gravely. “As I’m sure you understand, my Lady has many things to get used to, now she has reached thirteen summers.”

“She’s busy?” Sasami was disappointed, and Daisuke nodded his head.

“Unfortunately it can’t be helped.” He said softly. “You must realise that she is of a delicate disposition, and it is not wise for her to undertake long journeys away from the protection of the Council. She might become ill, and it is our duty to protect her from all harm.”

“I hadn’t realised.” Sasami admitted. “Well, all right then. It’s a shame, but I suppose it must be that way.”

“Lord Hirayama and I would be happy to accompany you, if you feel you’d like native companions.” Daisuke offered. “If we wouldn’t be imposing on your business.”

“I think that would be a good idea, personally.” Seiryō reflected, as Sasami glanced at him for confirmation. “Lord Oshima and Lord Hirayama know the layout of the land better than we do, and will probably be able to save us some time.”

“Then we’d like that. Thank you, Lord Oshima, Lord Hirayama.” Sasami hesitated, then dropped into a clumsy curtsy before them. “I’d be most honoured if you’d come with us.”

“Lady Sasami?” Daisuke’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “You know the custom of Yousai?”

“Lady Misao taught me.” Sasami nodded, dimpling. “I hope I did it right... I don’t want to be rude.”

“As Princess of Jurai, you owe us no such deference.” Hirayama said quietly. “But we are honoured and humbled by your gesture, Lady Sasami. And we would be most happy to accompany you to the Shrine of Tsunami that lies within the innermost city walls.”

He reached across to flick a switch against the wall, and within moments the door opened to reveal a young boy, his attire marking him out as a servant of the Council complex. His face was oddly marked in a way Sasami was unfamiliar with, and she stared at him for a moment, forgetting her manners as she absorbed his unusual appearance. For an instant he met her gaze, and a mixture of consternation and surprise flickered across his expression. Then it was gone, and he bowed his head solemnly.

“You sent for me, honoured sirs of the Council?” He said softly. Daisuke nodded his head.

“Rumiya, we need a shuttle-car at the front of the complex, as soon as possible.” He said quietly. “Run to the depot and pass on my instruction to the Guard on duty.”

“Yes, Lord Oshima.” Rumiya bowed his head once more. He hesitated for a moment, glancing at Sasami once more, then withdrawing from the chamber, shutting the door with a click behind him. Hirayama smiled.

“He will be quick. We should make our way down to the front of the building, ready.” He suggested. “Your Knights of Jurai are still outside — they should be told of our plans as well.”

“I’ll speak to Kamidake and Azaka, and meet you there.” Seiryō volunteered. “I’m sure Lord Motonoya can watch over Lady Sasami in my absence.”

Sasami shot her advisor a panicked look, but Seiryō merely winked at her before withdrawing from the chamber.

“It would be my pleasure, Sasami-hime.” From Yurikage’s expression, Sasami realised that he considered himself granted an

enormous boon, and she sighed heavily, holding out her arm to him as he took it gently in his grasp.

“Then let’s go.” She said resignedly. “And not keep anyone waiting.”

“This way, then, if you please, Sasami-sama.” Daisuke ran his hand over another panel in the wall and a second door opened. “Follow me, if you will.”

“Lord Oshima, can I ask you something?” Sasami said slowly, as they made their way through the elaborate hallways towards the main courtyard.

“Of course.” Daisuke nodded, turning to face her. “What is it?”

“That boy who you summoned. His face was marked in a way I never saw before... what was it for, please?”

“Rumiya is a child of the heathen peoples I mentioned earlier.” Daisuke smiled. “He has been in service at the palace since he was six years old, however... his parents were killed in a lightning strike on his family’s farm, and one of our people discovered him when they went out to visit some of the local communities. Many of these children are so marked at birth — I believe it has some spiritual significance, although I’m not sure what exactly each symbol means. Suffice it to say they are peaceful folk, so we never thought to question them. And Rumiya works hard for his keep — he is always prompt, polite and reliable.”

“Especially when tending to the Lady Misao.” Hirayama added. “We have not been able to allow her many friends outside of these walls, you understand, but Rumiya has always greeted her with warmth, and we’ve always been glad of it. It’s not natural for a child to have no contact with anyone her own age, after all. Rumiya is not much her senior... and he has never crossed the boundaries of servant and mistress. But occasionally he provides her with company, at times when noone else can attend her.”

“I see.” Sasami pursed her lips. “I guess there are a lot of different types of people I don’t know much about, even within Jurai’s territories. Do these people have magic, Lord Oshima? Because I thought I sensed something in him, when we met gazes.”

“It’s possible.” Daisuke agreed. “Though as I said, I’m not familiar enough with their ways to know. We don’t question or persecute those who are different on Yousai, you see... it’s not our business to intervene unless they pose us some significant threat.”



“That’s a nice way to look at it.” Sasami dimpled. “Sometimes I wish Jurai could be more like that, you know. Some people are, but there are others who find it difficult.”

“Jurai is often under direct threat though, Lady Sasami. Especially in recent times.” Yurikage pointed out wisely. “Your own life has been under threat on more than one occasion. It’s little surprise that some of the populace are uncertain. You are Tsunami’s reincarnation, and as such any threat to you is a threat to the soul of our world itself.”

“I suppose so.” Sasami agreed. “But I still wish that we could be more relaxed. Oh well. I suppose you’re right, Lord Motonoya. At least there are places within our Empire where it’s okay to just be yourself.”

At that moment they reached the front of the complex, finding that Seiryō and the two knights were already there waiting, and so was a peculiar gold-gilted contraption, compact and rounded in appearance, with large black wheels affixed to the base of the frame. It had a curious, quaint appearance, and yet from the crackles of electric energy that flickered across the bars that ran across the roof, it was clear that there was nothing archaic about the technology involved. As the steps were lowered down, Yurikage held out his hand to help Sasami aboard, and Sasami faltered for a moment, then accepted his gesture, clambering up into what was a comfortably fitted travel wagon, the seats coated in soft velvet and the walls padded with a like material. She settled herself by the window, as Yurikage took the seat opposite, offering her a smile.

“Much better than walking, and damaging your pretty shoes.” He observed. “Don’t you think so, Hime-sama?”

“It’s certainly beautiful.” Sasami agreed, as the two Council Lords boarded the carriage, followed by Seiryō, Azaka and Kamidake. “And there’s enough room for all to sit, too. I guess this is as good a way as any to see the city.”

“Considering the jewel heritage of this planet, I expect that will be something to see in itself.” Seiryō said comfortably, settling himself down at her side and casting a casual glance out of the window as the vehicle moved off at some speed. “Even from here you can see the glittering horizon.”

“Shinoshi spreads for several miles... at least fifty or maybe more.” Daisuke told him. “And as the sun begins to rise or set, it’s truly like seeing a sea of lights waking up across the land. We are very proud of our city, in truth. It is truly one of the most beautiful that I know.”

Sasami gazed out at the surrounding buildings, Misao’s words

echoing in her head as her gaze fell on the tall, glimmering shadow of Tounochi in the distance.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” She murmured, more to herself than to anyone else. “Depending on what you can see beneath the surface.”

“My Lady?” Yurikage looked startled, and Sasami blushed, offering him a sheepish smile.

“Nothing. Just thinking aloud.” She said, embarrassed. “It’s not important.”

Before anyone could respond, there was a tremendous crash from somewhere behind the carriage and the contraption rocked violently, causing Sasami to be flung against the window with a shriek of dismay.

“Sasami-sama!” Yurikage let out an exclamation of his own, grabbing out to steady her. “Forgive my roughness, my Lady, but I thought you might tumble out of the car completely.”

“Right through the pane glass of the window.” Seiryō observed drolly, getting to his feet as the shuttle became still once more. “Yes, Lord Motonoya, I can understand your concern. But whatever it was came from behind us... perhaps we would do better to investigate what caused such a violent tremor.”

At that moment a second echoing crash sent a new shockwave through the shuttle, and Daisuke and Hirayama exchanged alarmed looks, both on their feet in an instant as the vibration subsided.

“It came from the direction of the Council complex... Lady Misao might be in danger!” Daisuke exclaimed, fumbling with the carriage door. “We must get back there as soon as possible!”

“Allow me.” Seiryō drew his sword, and Sasami saw the blade flare into a hot white light as the nobleman cut decisively through the thick gilt metal, searing through the door lock and causing it to swing back of its own accord. “Lady Sasami, you should stay here. There may be danger outside, and you’d be better off here. Yurikage, stay with her... someone needs to make sure she’s all right.”

“I will defend you with my very life, Sasami-sama.” Yurikage drew his own sword at this, determination flickering across his expression, and Sasami sent Seiryō an anxious glance.

“What do you think it was? What caused all that noise?” She asked.

“We’re going to find out.” Seiryō said grimly. “Azaka, Kamidake —

will you come with us?"

"Willingly." Azaka got to his feet. "Kamidake, we must follow Lord Tennan... and ensure that this is not some threat aimed at Lady Sasami."

"Yes, I know." Kamidake met Sasami's gaze for a moment, then he was on his feet, his own weapon within his grasp as he leapt down from the carriage. As they did so, a third explosion rocketed across the ground, and Sasami set her teeth, gripping Yurikage firmly by the hand.

"I'm not just going to sit here, when stuff is going on out there." She said decidedly, pulling him roughly to his feet. "Come on, Yurikage-sama. If you want to defend me, you'll have to come with me. I'm not sitting back and letting everyone else have all the fun — I want to know what's going on, too!"

"Lady Sasami, wait! Stop it!" Yurikage protested, but the Princess was not listening. She leapt down from the carriage, stopping dead as she registered the scene outside.

Already smoke was pouring into the sky as buildings had set ablaze, and deep track marks in the ground indicated that the powerful blasts of energy had seared through the land. But it was the sky that Sasami's companions had their attention fixed on, and as Sasami raised her gaze in the same direction, she let out a little gasp of dismay.

"Karasu!" She exclaimed. "But that's not even possible!"

"You know this ship, Sasami-sama?" Daisuke shot her a startled glance. Sasami nodded, resolution flooding her features.

"It belongs to a nasty, evil space pirate who attacked my sister and tried to hold her hostage." She agreed. "But I thought he was sealed away. I thought he was a prisoner... that he'd never be able to get away again."

"Looks like another case of a broken seal." Seiryō said grimly. "Karasu, huh? That name means something to me also. I remember the police file... we are talking about the Space Pirate Haki, aren't we? The man who devastated galaxies and murdered his way through several civilisations?"

"Yes." Sasami nodded her head, biting down hard on her lip. "But why is he here? Is it... is it because of me?"

"He seems to be moving towards the coast. His blasts are random."

Yurikage pointed across the landscape towards the dock, and Hirayama's eyes widened in alarm.

"Tounochi!" He exclaimed. "He's going to attack Tounochi!"

"Tou... no... chi?" Seiryō cast the Councillor a startled look. "And that's significant for a reason?"

"He mustn't be allowed to break the seal." Daisuke looked equally frightened. "Hirayama, I must return to the Council Complex. Raise the alarm with our guardsmen at the dock. The ship must not be allowed to penetrate Lord Azusa's seal!"

"Lord Azusa? The Emperor?" Yurikage's eyes almost fell out of his head. "So that tower is a prison, then? There's something evil inside it?"

"The most dire evil imaginable." Hirayama said grimly, even as Daisuke hurried off in the direction of the council complex. "Let's just say that no good can come to anyone if that black ship's explosions break through the seal."

"It almost looks like he's aiming for it on purpose." Kamidake said thoughtfully, as new flares of light flickered along the horizon, setting fire to several fisher-cottages that stood at the wharf-front. "As if that's the thing he's come here to do. I remember Haki from our last encounter, Lady Sasami, and he's the kind of man who will attack without compunction or motive. He launched a blast at Tsunami-fune with no provocation. And yet there seems to be a design to his assault this time. As if he's been drawn here for the purpose of breaking down the Emperor's seal."

"Then we have to stop him!" Sasami said urgently. "There must be something we can do."

"Only raise the alarm." Hirayama shook his head, even as he scanned his palm across the emergency panel in a nearby alarm post, sending a bright flare into the sky. "There is nothing we can do... our magic is not as strong as that of the Imperial family, and we have no defences with which to fight a pirate spaceship. We are a peaceful people, Sasami-hime. I only hope that Lady Misao is safe."

"We can't just stand here." Sasami objected.

"I agree." Seiryō said quietly. "But unless he comes to the ground, there's not much we can do, either. Short of returning to the docking bay and mounting Unko or Tsunami-fune — which could cost precious minutes of time — I don't see what options we have."

“Tsunami...” Sasami’s eyes widened, then, “I’m not going to let that evil monster mess with Uncle’s seal, Seiryō! I’m going to stop him, if you’re not!”

“Sasami-sama!” Yurikage protested, resting a hand on her shoulder, but Sasami pushed back his touch, determination flickering in her crimson eyes.

“Tsunami, the people of Yousai called you here to help protect them from evil.” She whispered, even as she felt a surge of flowing energy envelop her body. “I know you’ve acted through me before, and I want you to do so again. Please help me defend this place from that nasty, horrible Haki monster. You know he took a shot at you before, and he tried to steal your gemstones for his own gain. Whatever he’s up to now, I don’t like it. Please help me to stop him!”

“Sasami-sama...” There was awe in Hirayama’s tone as Sasami felt the surging energy grow and flourish within her, flaring out to the tips of her fingers as she was bathed in a soft whiteish haze.

*“As you wish it, my sister.”* The words echoed softly around her head, bringing her comfort as she pushed her hands together in the way she had seen Ayeka do, focusing her mind and her energy on the black ship whose blasts were drawing ever closer to the glittering shield that surrounded Tounochi. A blast of bluish light flared out from her touch, searing across the horizon towards the dark tower, and as it connected with the gleaming whiteish barrier, it seemed to fortify it threefold, sending up flickers of energy that repelled the dark ship back up into space. As Sasami redoubled her concentration, Haki’s ship was forced away from his target, and a wild bevy of flame shot across the landscape in their direction, causing Yurikage to yell out in alarm. He reached out to pull the Princess down out of range, but the shield of her magic repelled him and as the fire drew closer, she merely held up her hands, watching as the flame flickered and dropped into cold ash on the ground before her.

“Go back to wherever you came from, Space Pirate Haki!” she exclaimed. “You’re not welcome here, so stop hurting people on this planet!”

There was a final blast of fire in her direction, then, as the force of the Tounochi shield grew even stronger, Karasu was repelled back into space, disappearing into the sky until he was no longer visible.

Sasami drew a deep breath into her lungs as Tsunami’s magic faded from within her, dropping against Kamidake who caught her with deft, quick hands, helping her to sit down on the steps of the carriage.

“Are you all right, my Lady?” He asked softly, and Sasami raised tired crimson eyes to his, nodding her head with a slight smile.

“But how did Haki get free of Washu’s prison?” She asked. “He shouldn’t have ever been able to get out.”

“Sasami-kami-sama.” Hirayama dropped to his knees before her, bowing his head. “You truly are the Goddess reincarnated, and your divine magic has protected us all from a dire and tragic fate. We are forever in your debt.”

“I suggest someone do something to help the civilians put out the fires hereabout.” Seiryō said pragmatically, bringing the situation back to reality with a bump as he tossed aside his own jacket, slipping his sword back into its scabbard. “Motonoya, give me a hand... unless you think we should let these people’s houses burn.”

“I’m right with you, Lord Tennen.” Yurikage agreed. “Lady Sasami, if you need me, I shan’t be far... the needs of the people call me.”

“Go and help as many as you can, Yurikage-sama.” Sasami said softly. “I’m quite all right. I just never used Tsunami’s magic quite like that before... it tired me out.”

“She grows stronger inside of you all the time.” Kamidake said thoughtfully, as Seiryō, Azaka and Yurikage hurried to help the nearby victims of the attack to put out the flickering flames. “I wonder.”

“What do you wonder?” Sasami eyed him quizzically. “Something wrong?”

“No.” Kamidake shook his head. “But Lady Washu did say that when Yugi tried to take your life, Tsunami rose up within you and took control of your body of her own volition. She’s more strongly there now than she was before... it’s almost as if Yugi’s attack on you broke through a barrier that kept the two of you apart. I’ve never seen you use Tsunami’s magic either. When she borrowed you, to take out Kihaku, that was different. But this was all you... it makes me wonder if perhaps you’ve gained access to her magic more strongly since the fight with Yugi.”

“Yugi did almost kill me.” Sasami’s eyes clouded at the memory. “But I don’t really remember what happened. I know that Tsunami saved my life, though. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I would have been killed if she hadn’t intervened then, and it does mean that we’re more interlinked than ever. It just... I felt I could do it, you know? And that I had to. Misao said there was an evil spirit sealed in that tower. One

that killed a lot of people. I didn't want Haki to break her out."

"Yes. I recall hearing some snippets of your conversation." Kamidake agreed. "The Tower of Blood."

"The Tower of Blood is not something we often speak of, Kamidake-san." Hirayama looked troubled. "It is a painful memory in the mind of all Shizukasari. I am surprised Lady Misao mentioned it to you so freely."

"I think she wanted to trust me. We've become friends, and you said yourself she hasn't had many of those." Sasami reasoned. "But it's a good thing she did. Otherwise I wouldn't have known, and I wouldn't have reacted how I did."

"Thanks to you, disaster has been averted." Hirayama bowed his head again.

"We should return to the complex. I don't think that we will be purifying any shrines today." Kamidake said quietly, and Hirayama nodded his head.

"I agree." He said gravely. "Can you walk, Lady Sasami? The way is blocked from the explosion, and the shuttle is stuck here for the time being... until the roadways are cleared."

"I can carry her the distance." Kamidake said simply. "If my Lady will allow me to."

"With pleasure. I'm exhausted, now." Sasami nodded. "I guess I used more strength than I realised."

"Yes. Perhaps you did." Kamidake sent her another thoughtful look, and Sasami frowned.

"Kamidake, what's with those looks? Tell me!"

"Nothing in particular." Kamidake said evenly. "Just that you used some of your own strength to fight off Haki. If it had been all Tsunami's, then you would not be so easily tired."

"I guess so... but why does that matter?" Sasami was confused. Kamidake smiled.

"It doesn't." He assured her. "It was just interesting to me. That's all."

Gently he lifted her up in his arms. "Lord Tennan, Lord Motonoya, Azaka — we are going to return to the Council Complex, so Lady Sasami can rest."

“We’re about done here, so we’ll come with you.” Seiryō decided, casting a glance around at the smouldering remains of the property. “No doubt someone will be able to find shelter and food for these people tonight.”

“It will be seen to.” Hirayama agreed. “That is the policy of Yousai — to always help those in need.”

“Then we will return.” Yurikage cast Sasami an anxious glance. “You are so pale, Princess... are you sure you are truly all right?”

“I will be fine, thank you, Lord Motonoya.” Sasami nodded her head. “I just need to sleep.”

As they approached the Council Complex, it was only too clear that Haki’s missiles had indeed struck in the vicinity of the official buildings, and as they passed through massed groups of anxious guardsmen and apprehensive council members, they were greeted by an alarmed Daisuke on the doorstep.

“Lord Oshima, Lady Sasami is truly a Goddess in the flesh. Her magic drove that monster away from Tounochi, and we are all saved!” Hirayama told him fervently. “I saw with my own eyes, she holds Tsunami’s magic deep within her heart.”

“That’s as may be.” Daisuke’s eyes glittered with anxiety. “But we have another problem. Lady Misao is missing, and her room was set ablaze by the pirate’s blasts. It seems very likely that he took her as his hostage before launching his attack on Tounochi.”

“Damn that girl.”

Haki clenched his fists, glaring darkly out at the space beyond Karasu’s windows as he ran over the encounter once again in his mind. As he pressed his fists angrily against one another, he caught sight of the still, limp form that lay prone across the floor of his ship and his expression darkened as he approached the unconscious child, poking at her gingerly with the toe of his boot. She did not stir, and he muttered a string of curse words under his breath, dropping down into the pilot’s chair.

“Damn that girl!” He exclaimed, his roar loud enough to rattle across Karasu’s speaker cones and sensors. “What is it that child has that so easily overpowered my attack?”

He sighed, running a resentful nail along the beads that lined his throat. At his touch, they flickered with energy, and he drew his hand away, gritting his teeth.



“Nobody told me there’d be a little brat on this Yousai planet, with the power to repel Karasu back into space.” He muttered. “Just wait until I see that bird. I was totally unprepared. And what is so special about this Misao kid, anyway? Why go to so much trouble to take her from that wretched place, if just to cast a spell on her and send her back? Some all powerful mage this Ramia woman is, if she can’t do her own dirty work.”

He frowned, gazing up at Karasu’s monitor as it glittered and flared into life.

“That girl...” He mused. “Karasu, we’ve seen her before, haven’t we? I feel recognition pulsing through your sensors just as much as it teases at my brain. That young girl, dressed in the robes of Jurai. She’s a little older, but the face is the same... why do I know her? If I had met her on a raid, I would surely not have left her alive!”

Karasu’s screen hummed for a moment, and then very slowly, an image began to form before the pirate, sending bright flares of light glittering across the dark metal of the drive room. Haki’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

“She was with Ryoko, when that wench and her associates sealed me in that wretched cold place!” He exclaimed. “The little girl who held Tsunami’s gems as if they were nothing more than pebbles in her hand! She deflected my blasts then, just as she did today. Curses! What is that child? Why does she repel my magic so easily?”

Karasu’s image blurred into a new one, and for a moment Haki just stared at the woman who gradually appeared before him on the screen, long white rays of light extending from her form like the spokes of a wheel. He shook his head slowly.

“You aren’t serious.” He whispered. “Tsunami herself? *That* girl? She gave the gems to Ryoko by her own hand...? But Tsunami is a dead priestess — a Goddess, sealed within the core of Jurai. How can she walk around as an ordinary mortal? And more, *why*?”

He glanced down at Misao once more, checking briefly to make sure the child was unconscious. Finding her still stunned, he nodded his head in grim satisfaction.

“At least this part of the bargain will soon be over.” He muttered. “No doubt I will have to go back to that wretched world and unlock that tower another time... if I want that witch to keep her word and free me from the spell Ryoko and the others put me under. But for the time being, I want this horrible little brat off my ship. She’s making me want to kill her, and I value my own existence more than that

right at the moment. At least until I've gained my full strength again, I will have to do what that bird tells me, damn it. Which means that the girl gets dumped, but I don't get to spill her blood."

He flexed his hands, eying the fading scars that crossed his palms.

"Such a shame. It's been so long since I've killed." He mused sadly. "Still, I said I'd take this Misao brat to the space station, and when I've done that, she'll be out of my hands. If she — or anyone else — happens to be killed when I launch my next attack on Yousai, so be it. I won't shed any tears."

The glittering lights of the space station hovered into view at that moment, and as Haki drew Karasu neatly into one of the battered docking bays, he thought he saw a flash of blue feathers flit across his line of sight. He frowned, his eyes narrowing.

"So the bird is here already, is he?" He murmured. "Well, suits me fine. The sooner I am rid of this brat, the better."

He scooped the child roughly up in his arms, leaping neatly down towards the belly of the ship as Karasu extended his walkway to connect with that of the station itself. With little care or grace, he dropped Misao in a heap in the foyer of the establishment, eying her with disdain as he did so.

"So you managed to do at least one thing right, then."

The voice echoed derisively in his ear, and he turned his head towards the sound, seeing the cocked head of a blue bird staring back at him. Sharp claws dug through his pirate attire into the skin of his shoulder and he winced, bringing up his hand to swat the bird away. Rumiya was too fast for him, however, launching himself in flight and shaking his head admonishingly as he dropped down beside the still Misao.

"She's not hurt. Just stunned, that's all." Haki said bad-temperedly. "You can tell your witch that I didn't hurt her — she fainted when I came on her."

"I'm not surprised. You smell like rotting flesh and you look a fair bit worse." Rumiya said succinctly, touching his beak gently to Misao's skin, then settling himself on a more secure perch. "But you failed to release Lady Ramia from the tower."

"That wasn't my fault!" Haki objected. "I was blocked by that little bitch with the powers of Tsunami!"

"Sasami-sama?" Rumiya's eyes opened wide with surprise. "She

stopped you? But how? Does she know of your intent... were you so careless as to tell someone our plans?"

"Of course not. Karasu and I work with noone else." Haki said impatiently. "But we have met before, this child and I. She was on the bridge of Karasu, when I was sealed away — and I would dearly like to put an end to her as much as I would Ryoko and the others. So you need not worry. I will be going back to Yousai."

"No." Rumiya's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. "Lady Ramia does not wish you to make a second attempt — not yet. For the time being, she is content that her daughter has been removed from the protection of Jurai's seal. For now, you can go in peace."

"Wait a minute." Haki held up his hands, his eyes glinting with an angry light. "The deal was that I'd be freed once I did what she asked of me. If she doesn't want me to blast her out, I want my life, please. I've given her the brat, and I'm fed up with these mind games."

"I don't question Lady Ramia's decisions, and you might want to consider that option, too." Rumiya said quietly, hopping across Misao's still form until he stood beside her face. Slowly he spread his wing, brushing the feathers gently against her skin. For an instant, the child's body glowed with a soft amber light. Then, in an instant, it was gone, and Haki almost wondered if he had imagined it in the first place. "She has simply told me to tell you to await her further instruction. I advise you to have patience, if your life is really so important to you. She's not someone you want to antagonise."

With that, he made to leave, but Haki moved to block his path.

"Wait a minute, parrot boy, what about the brat?" He demanded. "You're not leaving her with me!"

"I have no way to take her back to Yousai." Rumiya said levelly.

"And that Ramia woman said she didn't want me to go back to that planet, either. You just said as much." Haki folded his arms across his chest. "If you want to take the brat home, find another way. It won't be through me. I'll blast her free, when she tells me she's ready — but I won't be hanging around doing all kinds of odds and ends in the meantime. Let her protectors come and fetch her home. I have my own loose ends to pursue, after all, and I'm no kid's babysitter."

With that he turned his back on the two, bird and girl, pushing back the door to the bar and stalking inside, casting a cold, angry glare around at the present patrons. There was an immediate reaction, as those within sought to make themselves scarce, and somehow this

antagonised Haki's temper more than usual.

"I'll give you something to be afraid of." He seethed, raising his hands and flaring bolts of whiteish energy across the bar, shattering a row of glasses and catching an unsuspecting barmaid in the blast. She screamed as the flare made contact with her body, flying backwards against one of her colleagues who crumpled beneath her, blood spilling across the floor from the wound in her chest.

"That felt better." Haki glanced at his hands, nodding in satisfaction. "Ryoko, you'd better watch your step. You're next on my agenda."

The beads glittered angrily around his throat and he cast them a glance, annoyance in his blue eyes.

"That witch had better be careful, also." He muttered. "Because otherwise I might just blow up more than this Tounochi tower, when next I visit Yousai."

## Chapter 8

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### Chapter Eight

Silence greeted Daisuke's shock announcement, then, as his words began to sink in, it was Seiryō who was the first to react.

"You think Haki took the girl?" He asked quietly, turning his attention towards the sky. "There's no way she wasn't a victim of falling masonry? Perhaps she's trapped beneath something, if her room was charred. His blasts were strong, after all."

"No, we've checked. We've checked the whole upper landing, where Lady Misao's quarters are. She's nowhere." Daisuke was becoming more agitated by the minute, running his hands through his thick hair as he did so. "Oh, what would her late father say, if he knew I'd been so careless with the charge he placed on me!"

"We should go after him! And get Misao back!" Sasami exclaimed. "We can't just let him fly off with her, Seiryō-sama — he might hurt her!"

"Yes, very possibly." Seiryō's eyes flickered with gravity, and he nodded his head. "Lady Sasami is correct. Someone should follow his trail and as soon as humanly possible. If there is any chance of getting the girl back alive, we must go immediately."

"We?" Hirayama gazed at his companion in surprise. "Are you volunteering to go yourself, Lord Tennan?"

"Yes." Seiryō agreed. "I have the proper training to hunt down a pirate of this nature, and I think it's for the best if I take the Unko and go. Haki's a dangerous adversary and you already said, Lord Hirayama, that you don't have the required defences on Yousai to mount any kind of attack on his ship."

"I want to go too, Seiryō-sama." Sasami put in. "Tsunami-fune has come up against him before, and she was all right in the end. And Misao is my friend. She must be so scared — I want to help!"

"Princess Sasami, you must be joking!" Yurikage's expression became one of alarm. "You can't put yourself in such jeopardy — what would Lord Haru say?"

"But I want to help Misao!" Sasami objected, wriggling down from Kamidake's protective grip and putting her hands on her hips. "Please,

I want to! You have to let me try, at least — I have Tsunami to protect me!”

“Princess, Yurikage-sama is right.” Seiryō said quietly. “You should remain here. If Haki was to return, it might be that your connection to Tsunami would be needed again, after all.”

“It might already be too late for Misao.” Daisuke bit his lip. “The charm is broken, and even if she isn’t slain...”

“What do you mean, Lord Oshima?” Kamidake looked curious. “What charm? Is there something we should know about Lady Misao’s well-being?”

“When Misao-sama’s father died, and she was left in my charge, Lord Azusa and his companions put a special protective magic over the Council complex, to protect Misao from any harm as she grew up.” Daisuke said heavily. “It is for that reason that we’ve been so loath to let her leave these grounds ever since. She isn’t a strong child in health, or in stature... and we feared for her safety if she were to stray too far. My late Lord left no other heirs to inherit his title... for the sake of Yousai and the Shizukasari, we had to take steps to ensure Misao-sama’s life was safe.”

“And now she’s outside of the complex, she is more likely to be in danger?” Seiryō looked sceptical. “I don’t really hold with charms and good luck spells, Lord Oshima, as my Lady Princess will doubtless be able to tell you. But so long as she is in the hands of a man like Haki, her life is in very real danger already. Sasami-sama, do I have your permission to leave Yousai and follow the trail of the black ship? If we have any hope of bringing Misao-sama back alive, I must leave immediately.”

Sasami sighed, then she nodded her head.

“Yes.” She agreed sadly. “I want to come, but you have a point. I mean, about there being another attack here. And if Yurikage-sama stays with me, I suppose I’ll be safe enough here.”

“I will defend you with my last breath, my lady. You know that.” Yurikage flashed her a warm smile. “I will not leave your side — you need have no fear of that.”

“I will also stay with Lady Sasami.” Azaka said quietly. “But Kamidake should accompany you, Lord Tennan. You shouldn’t face this danger alone, and he is younger and more agile than I am at my age.”

“That’s not true.” Kamidake objected. “But if Lord Tennan wants

me to go with him, I will. I want to see the Lady Misao safe as well, and I know Sasami-sama will be protected enough, here with you."

"Then it's settled." Seiryō said frankly. "We'll go and we'll go now. I can get the Unko in the air in a matter of minutes... but we mustn't tarry here any longer."

"I will also accompany you, Lord Tennan." Hirayama said quietly. "You were a colleague of my son, and I know your reputation from his own account. I would like to help, if I can, in retrieving Lady Misao from the clutches of this monster... and Lord Oshima must stay on Yousai, because of his responsibilities to the Council."

"I really don't mind if we're taking a whole school party, Lord Hirayama, so long as we go now." Seiryō said shortly, bowing his head in Sasami's direction as he did so. "Sasami-sama, we will return as soon as we can. Hopefully with the Lady Misao in one piece."

"Go safely, Seiryō! Suki will kill me if anything happens to you." Sasami called after him, even as the three men hurried into the complex and through the halls towards the docking bay that flanked the rear of the construction.

"Do you think they have a hope of rescuing her?" It was Daisuke who broke the silence and, glancing at him, Sasami felt pity for the man, his composure shattered in light of Misao's disappearance. She nodded her head.

"Seiryō-sama is smart and he knows what he's doing." She agreed. "I have faith in him to find Misao, and to bring her back, Lord Oshima."

"I hope so." Daisuke twisted his hands together, casting an apprehensive, fleeting glance across the horizon to where the shadowy shape of Tounochi glittered on the horizon. "So much rests on her being safe and sound, after all. So very much indeed."

"You really care about Misao-chan, don't you, Lord Oshima?" Sasami asked gently. Daisuke nodded his head.

"As a father would love a daughter, or an uncle a favoured niece." He agreed heavily. "But right now my concerns are for Yousai and the Shizukasari. We need her, Sasami-sama, just as Jurai needs you. Without Misao-sama, there is no heiress, and no one to carry on her late father's noble title. She is the last of her family line... she must be found and brought back to this planet alive, else I fear for the consequences for Yousai!"

Well, it had been a long time.

Ryoko hesitated at the door of the space bar, then placed her hand firmly on the door, pushing it open with considerably more defiance than she felt as she sauntered into the busy, bustling bar. As she paused, eying her surroundings, she recognised the hazy smell of smoke that drifted around the chamber and a sear of magic across the rear wall told her that already some of the clientele had got frisky that day, probably resulting in them being forcibly turfed out into the cold of space to re-assemble their composure.

She frowned, setting her teeth as she manoeuvred her way between the tables towards the bar. She had never liked being surrounded by so many ill-meaning people, and yet somehow the atmosphere was even more oppressive today than it had been in the past, as slowly every eye in the room turned to watch her careful progress.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Ryoko.”

A bulky man barred her way, folding his scarred arms over a barrel chest as he sized her up with bloodshot, leery black eyes. “What are you doing here, princess? Not your kind of hang out these days, is it?”

“Maybe the King of Jurai kicked her out of his favour.” A second man, barely more than skin and bone beneath his shabby pirate garb put in sardonically. “Or maybe she’s been sent here to spy on us — Ryoko the turncoat, betraying her kind for the King of Jurai’s gold.”

“I’m not in Jurai’s pay, and I resent the implication.” Ryoko said flatly, meeting the man’s challenging stare with a cold glare of her own. “Step aside, unless you want to be hurt. My business here is not with you.”

“Well, she still talks like a pirate.” The bulky man grinned, revealing yellowed and blackened teeth, some of which were missing or chipped as a result of earlier bar brawls. “Shall we see if she still fights like a pirate, boys? Or has she gone soft, cossetted by all this Juraian good living!”

“I warned you once.” Ryoko’s eyes glittered with anger, and faint flares of energy flickered across her palms. “Step aside and let me through. I haven’t time to be talking to the likes of you.”

“Well, little lady, you’re not exactly welcome here.” The thin man leant forward, so Ryoko could smell his fetid breath on her skin, and she winced back, covering her nose with the sleeve of her gown. “What’s wrong with you now, huh? Too good for us, is that it? Dressed in your fancy fabrics and with the Emperor eating out of your



hand. Do you think you're better than us now?"

"I've always been better than you. That's what you don't understand." Ryoko flicked her hand into her sabre, launching herself up into the air as she glared down at them. "Anyone wanting to fight me can do so. But don't blame me if you end up bruised. Whatever I choose to do with my life, I'm still more than able to fight my corner."

"Let's just see, shall we?" The bulky man drew his own sword, swiping it challengingly in her direction. "Come on, Ryoko. Let's see what you have."

"Oh, this is such a waste of my time and energy." Ryoko muttered, bringing her hands together in a flare of amber light as she sent the bolt in the pirate's direction. It hit him clean in the midriff, sending him clattering backwards into a nearby table, striking his head on the wood as he slumped unconscious on the floor. A bevy of gunfire followed his fall, as other pirates drew their weapons, but Ryoko brought her hands together again, sending up a forcefield around her body as the flares and bullets glanced harmlessly off it.

"I'm not small fry. Don't make that mistake." She said blackly, glaring down at the pirates below her. "Or have you forgotten so easily the demon pirate Ryoko? I'm stronger now than I was then... does anyone else want to fight me?"

Almost with one accord, the pirates that had gathered behind the thin man and his cohort began to melt back to their own tables, pulling away from a conflict it was clear they were unlikely to win, and Ryoko set down gracefully on the floor, dropping her shield as she sent them all pitying looks.

"Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me weak." She said softly. "And just because I choose a better life than any of you have does not mean I couldn't wipe every single one of you out with one blast of my magic. Remember it before you attack me the next time. I won't be so forgiving a second time."

With that she stalked up to the bar, resting her elbows on the counter as she met the startled gaze of the barman on duty.

"Hi, Jiro." She said evenly. "It's been a long while."

"Ryoko." Jiro faltered, then, "That it has. You don't haunt these waters any more... or so as I've heard tell."

"Yes, well, perhaps not so much as I did, before." Ryoko acknowledged. "But you needn't worry. My association with the Emperor of Jurai is not as pronounced as these idiots might have you

believe. And I have no interest in telling him — or anyone else — about this place and the things which go on here. To do that would be to betray a code of honour I still believe in, so you can rest assured that I won't betray you to anyone who you'd not like to come visiting."

Jiro eyed her for a moment, then he smiled, holding out his hand to hers. She stared at him for a moment, then extended her own gloved fist and the barman grasped it tightly in his, squeezing it warmly.

"I should know that of you without even asking it." He said decidedly. "You've been missed by some, you know. Whatever those bull-headed fools think. I've missed our chats."

"Well, I have so much else going on now that I don't have so much time to slip below the law, as it were." Ryoko offered him a faint smile.

"So it's true, then, that you've gone straight?" Jiro asked. "Renounced your pirate life for good, in favour of an honest trade?"

"I suppose I have, in one way or another." Ryoko mused. "I'm not a pirate any more, that's for sure. Things have changed a lot since last we spoke. But coming back here, it almost feels like they haven't."

"Why are you really here, Ryoko?" Jiro asked her curiously, even as she flicked her fingers in the direction of the few surviving drinks glasses. "Don't worry, I still remember your special blend. You're the only one brave enough to drink such a cocktail now — I'm telling you, since the Balta moved out across space and stopped frequenting this place, it's not been the same."

"The Balta have moved?" Ryoko looked surprised. Then she shrugged. "No, don't tell me. I have no intention of betraying anyone, but the less you tell me, the less chance there is of something slipping out that shouldn't."

"That's probably wise." Jiro eyed her keenly, pushing the glass across the counter, and Ryoko dropped some coins onto the deck, taking a sip and casting him a smile.

"As ever, perfect." She told him genially. "If there's one thing I've missed, it's your special blends... they don't make them like this on Planet Earth."

"So you really have withdrawn to the back of beyond." Jiro remarked. Ryoko bit her lip, then nodded her head.

"Yes." She agreed quietly, casting a sidelong glance at the pirates

nearest to the bar as she lowered her voice. "But if I'm doing you the favour of keeping your trade a secret, I'd appreciate it if you'd do me the same favour. I don't want an army of lunatic pirates showing up on my doorstep, and even if I can fight each and every one of them, I don't want to have to. My life is different now. I'm not interested in blood battles to the death."

Jiro pursed his lips.

"Of course." He agreed. "It surprises me, that's all. It doesn't seem the sort of place that a pirate of your stature would end up settling down."

"No, I suppose it isn't." Ryoko sighed pensively, draining the rest of her drink and pushing the glass back towards him. "But sometimes fate has a weird way of turning out."

"You found what you were looking for, then, I trust?"

"Meaning what?" Ryoko pinkened slightly at the searching look in her old ally's eyes, and Jiro smiled, scooping up her glass and eyeing it thoughtfully.

"Another?" He asked simply, and Ryoko nodded her head, reaching into her pocket for more coins.

"What did you mean, Jiro? About finding what I was looking for?" She asked. Jiro shrugged, reaching for the bottles of alcohol as he did so.

"Well, there have been so many rumours since you quit this sphere that it's hard to sort the fact from the fiction." He said evenly. "But I have seen Nagi a couple of times in recent months. I consider her a more reliable source than most when it comes to the truth, and she's always had a keen interest in your life. According to her, you'd found a man and settled down on some planet with him... I can't say she was too impressed by the whole situation, but I think it meant she'd given up her quest to take your head."

"Nagi." Ryoko looked rueful. "Yes, we've crossed paths since my... my retirement, and I'd say that's true. But I didn't realise she'd been sharing the story across the cosmos."

"She hasn't, I don't think. I asked her if she'd seen you, that's all." Jiro shrugged. "You know that she took Shank two months back? Since then, she only has to walk in the door and half the pirates duck beneath their tables to keep out of her way. It made me wonder about you and her relentless quest to track you down."

“She took Shank’s head?” Ryoko’s eyes opened wide with surprise, then she grinned. “No, I shouldn’t be startled by that. I knew he was on her hit list, and that she’s not one to give up. I’m glad that she nailed him, Jiro. Let’s just say I have a few personal issues she’s laid to rest for me by dealing with that particular pirate. I’ve never had much love for any of the Daluma, but he hurt Ryo Ohki badly with his wretched ship, and he was responsible for the death of a raiding partner. I find that hard to forgive.”

“I imagine you mean Hotsuma.” Jiro said gravely. ‘Yes, I thought so.’ As Ryoko nodded. “Nagi was full of that story, also. She doesn’t like misplaced justice, that woman.”

“No. I’d noticed.” Ryoko agreed wryly. “Hotsuma was never more than a partner to me, but I’m glad he’s been properly avenged, now. Everything is in it’s proper place at last.”

“But that isn’t why you came here, to talk about Nagi, Shank and Hotsuma, is it?” Jiro eyed her pensively, and Ryoko shook her head, scooping up the newly filled glass and taking a long, slow draught.

“No, it’s not.” She admitted. “I’m actually here looking for information about *another* former raiding partner.”

Jiro’s eyes clouded, and Ryoko saw a troubled expression flit across his features.

“Haki.” He murmured. Ryoko’s eyes narrowed.

“Does that mean you’ve seen him?” She asked lightly.

“I remember that the last time you came hunting that particular pirate, he disappeared into space for a long time.” Jiro said thoughtfully. “And we thought that someone had finally put an end to his rotten soul. But he showed up round these parts in the last few weeks. I’ve seen him once or twice, yes... to be honest, I wasn’t pleased to renew the acquaintance.”

“You seem much keener to give me information on the man this time than you did last.” Ryoko observed, emptying her glass a second time and pushing it aside as she met his gaze. “Why the lack of reticence? What has he done to cross you? I know how much you like to keep a neutral outlook here, as much as you can.”

“Well, with your connections now, I imagine you’re the only one who can do something about him.” Jiro said quietly. “As I said, the last time you asked after him, he disappeared for a long while. The rumour is he’s immortal, and that noone can kill him. But I’m not sure I believe that... and there are certainly no pirates in this sector now

who could even raise a challenge against one such as Haki.”

“And you hope that if you tell me about him, I’ll take him out?” Ryoko asked. “When have you ever known me to slay anyone, Jiro? Killing isn’t my style.”

“No, I know.” Jiro admitted. “But this is a special case. Haki was here not long before you arrived, Ryoko — maybe a couple of hours ago, no longer. He’s the one who gashed my wall and shattered my glasses, but more importantly, he killed two of my bar staff. They had done nothing — not even spoken to him, but he attacked them anyway. There’s always been a certain code in this place that we serve you people, and keep your secrets, and in return we’re immune from harm at your hands. Haki has broken that code of honour, and so I’m breaking my own neutrality. He’s more of a monster now than he’s ever been, and you know better than most what he’s capable of doing. He needs to be stopped... and if you do have any connection to Jurai, I think it will take a force such as that to challenge him.”

Ryoko was silent for a moment, anger flickering in her heart at her companion’s words.

“I should have known he wouldn’t waste any time killing innocent people.” She muttered. “All right, Jiro, I take your point. And believe me, I want to put him away again, too. I don’t know who or what let him out from his prison, but they were a fool to do so.”

She eyed the barman thoughtfully.

“I don’t suppose, when he’s been here, that you’ve noticed anything significant? Anything that might tell me where he is or what he’s been planning?” She asked. “I know it’s a long shot — I know Haki doesn’t confide in people under any circumstances. But anything at all would help... Karasu isn’t an easy ship to track down in the blackness of space.”

Jiro frowned, pursing his lips.

“This will sound strange,” He said slowly. “But the last time he was here — I mean, before this morning — he seemed to be talking to himself. Or at least, that was my first impression. I always keep my distance from ones like him, so I didn’t hear a word of what was said. But as I moved to serve another customer, I saw what he had been talking to.”

“And?” Ryoko’s brows drew together in confusion. “Who was it?”

“*What* was it, you mean.” Jiro shook his head slowly. “Call me crazy, Ryoko, but it looked very much like, well, a blue parrot.”

“A... parrot?” Ryoko was floored. “Haki’s taken up a familiar now?”

“I can only tell you what I saw.” Jiro shrugged his shoulders. “He seemed to be having a heated debate with a blue bird that looked a lot like a parrot to me.”

“He’s finally lost his marbles.” Ryoko snorted with derision. “I guess that was to be expected... no wonder he’s been acting so strangely, if he’s now conversing with random birds as well as slaughtering people on a whim.”

“Are you going to look for him?” Jiro asked, and Ryoko hesitated, her promise to Washu flitting across her mind. She frowned, spreading her hands.

“Maybe. If I can find a vapour trail.” She agreed slowly. “Thanks for your help and the drinks, Jiro. I don’t know when we might meet again, so take care of yourself, all right? You still serve the best drinks in this sector — don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!”

“There is one other thing, Ryoko, before you leave.” Jiro held up his hands and Ryoko paused, eying him curiously.

“What is it?” She asked. “Ryo Ohki is waiting for me — she’s already nagging at me as to why I’m taking so long. I think she can tell I stopped for a drink — I’m going to get a lecture when I get back aboard her as it is. I told her I was only coming to ask a couple of questions, and she doesn’t like me flying her when I’ve been drinking.”

“I’d like to ask your help on one other thing.” Jiro said simply, lifting up the divide that separated bar from patron and gesturing for her to follow him through. “Will you come back with me? I need to show you something.”

“Behind the bar?” Ryoko looked nonplussed, but she nodded, carefully slipping between the wood slats. “But I don’t understand.”

“Through this way.” Jiro indicated a door up ahead, pushing it back and ushering her inside. “I know it’s asking a lot, but since you’re here, well, you seem the right person to ask.”

Ryoko stepped inside the small, dowdy back room of the bar, stopping dead as she registered the fact that the room wasn’t empty. A young man dressed in the uniform of the bar was crouched in the corner, beside a small figure swathed in blankets. At first Ryoko thought it was nothing more than a heap of clothing, but at the sound of the door, the figure raised her head, her tearful aqua eyes gazing at Jiro and his companion in fright and confusion. Ryoko’s brows knitted

together, and she eyed the barman in confusion.

“Jiro, that’s a kid.” She said unnecessarily. “What the hell is she doing here?”

“You tell me.” Jiro shrugged helplessly. “All we’ve been able to get out of her is that her name is Misao and that she’s scared of something. Hideru found her cowering in the lobby of the place, dazed and confused and crying hysterically, so he brought her back here. Some of the pirates were already circling her with some interest, so he thought — and so did I — that it was safer for her to be in the back where noone could molest her. You know what some of those guys can be like.”

“Too well.” Ryoko said darkly. “So where do I come into this? What does it have to do with me?”

“If she stays here, the chances are something bad will happen to her.” Jiro said honestly. “She’s just a small kid — no more than twelve or thirteen, I’d say — and this isn’t where she belongs, whyever she came to be here. If someone like Haki should launch a more dangerous attack on our place, or another fight should break out, she might find herself in the middle of it. It struck me that she might have been someone’s hostage, and somehow she broke free of her captor — but she’s not been coherent enough for me to be sure. I realise that it’s a lot to ask of you, but I hoped you might take her away with you on Ryo Ohki.”

“Take her... with me?” Ryoko blinked. “What in hell do you think I know about kids, Jiro?!”

“No idea.” Jiro owned. “But you are a woman.”

“What has that to do with it?” Ryoko looked bemused. “Just because I’m female doesn’t mean I automatically know what to do with random abandoned children!”

“More importantly, Ryoko, you’re the best hope the girl has to get somewhere safe and out of the reach of whoever has been trying to hurt her.” Jiro continued, unphased by her protestations. “You’re not a pirate any more, by your own admission. Can’t you take her to this planet of yours, at least until you can find out who she is and where she belongs? She can’t stay here... you must see that.”

“But...” Ryoko bit her lip, taking in the pitiful, huddled form once more. Then she sighed, spreading her hands in a gesture of submission.

“All right.” She agreed heavily. “The kid can come with me. But I’m

not sure she'll be any safer flying with Ryo Ohki and I than she would be staying here. I might be a woman, but that doesn't mean I have a clue where kids are concerned. I'm still more of a pirate than a parent — don't think I've gone soft all of a sudden."

"But you'll take her, and that's what matters." Jiro seemed relieved, approaching the girl and gently holding his hand out to her.

"It's all right now, child. Ryoko is a friend — and she'll help you. She'll take you somewhere safe where nobody can hurt you." He said quietly.

The girl struggled to her feet, taking the barman's hand hesitantly as he helped her up. Ryoko eyed her for a moment, then sighed again.

"Misao, you said?" She asked at length. "Well, Misao, I guess we'd better get going. My ship is waiting... let's go."



## Chapter 9

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### Chapter Nine

“Well, Rumiya, so how fares our young Lady of Yousai?”

Ramia turned from the window of her prison chamber, casting the small blue bird an inquisitive look as he shook his feathers, morphing himself back into his human form as he let out a heavy sigh.

“You seem concerned.” Ramia’s eyes glittered with curiosity. “For whom? For that pirate? Or for your dear friend Misao?”

“He left her at the space station. Just left her and flew off.” Rumiya said flatly. “Ramia-sama, was that what you intended? Did you want him to bring Misao-sama back to Yousai? Because she’s out there, alone and stranded in the middle of nowhere, and...”

“And she will return home. Don’t worry about little matters that don’t concern you.” Ramia’s eyes narrowed in amusement. “Haki is annoying, but he has served my purpose in part so far. I am not going to release my wrath on him just yet — he did manage to steal the girl, even if his ship was not strong enough to break through the barrier around Tounochi. I am feeling merciful at present... you need not fear for his soul.”

“I don’t care what you do to Haki, Lady Ramia.” Rumiya admitted. “But how will Misao-sama be able to get back here? She doesn’t know anyone or anything in that place. I wanted to bring her with me — but I have no ship and she wouldn’t have survived flying through space. She’s not like me.”

“No, she’s not like you.” Ramia agreed cruelly. “She is the daughter of a great Lady, and she has power that you don’t even imagine she could possess. Now she’s away from Yousai, that power can be awakened... you did as I instructed you?”

“Yes, Lady Ramia. I cast the magic over her in just the way you told me.” Rumiya sighed heavily. “But I still don’t understand...”

“Are you questioning my methods, Rumiya?” Ramia cut across him, eying him carefully, and Rumiya flushed red, shaking his head.

“No, of course not. I was just concerned for Misao-sama’s safety. That’s all.”

“I know the Council of Yousai better than you. I know their motives.” Ramia said quietly. “Already from my window I have observed a ship leave this world. They will track the girl down, and she will be quite safe. Should anyone attack her, they will get a serious shock. I have no worries for Misao’s safety. Now her true nature has been woken inside of her, I can call on her assistance whenever I need her. She will make it home quite safely... those meddling Councillors will be my puppets in this instance, bringing her back to her home without any clue as to the fact they’re helping me.”

“I suppose that does make sense.” Rumiya admitted. “I’m sorry, my Lady. I know you would have thought this out properly before you asked me to invoke Haki’s help.”

“Of course.” Ramia’s eyes twinkled with humour.

“But you’re still trapped inside Tounochi.” Rumiya said sadly. “Haki said that Lady Sasami prevented him from breaking through the barrier. That somehow she called upon the magic of Tsunami, and pushed him away. There are deep burns and scorches in the land surrounding the tower, my Lady, and some of the homes on the waterfront suffered from his barrage. It looks like he’s speaking the truth — that he did mount an assault on Tounochi, but that Princess’s magic kept him back.”

“Juraian magic.” Ramia’s eyes narrowed to mere slits as she considered. “I see. And I hadn’t thought that the brat was going to be so much trouble. Juraians are always so tricky, Rumiya... remind me of that the next time I become careless and overlook their presence. Because she was a girl no older than Misao, I underestimated her. But that was foolish — I see that now. I will have to fix that problem as well, if I want to be free from this prison at all.”

“But how?” Rumiya asked. “If Lady Sasami truly is Tsunami, how can you bring down a Goddess when you’re still trapped within these walls? Isn’t the spell that holds you here based on Tsunami’s magic?”

“Yes... in a manner of speaking, it is.” Ramia looked thoughtful. “You’re not mistaken. Azusa put the curse over this place to forbid anyone with Arian blood from entering or exiting the building. That’s what holds me so firmly in place. I can’t break that magic down, because I have no way of reaching Azusa and pulling holes through his heart. But if his magic is Tsunami’s magic... perhaps there is a way to resolve this, after all. Perhaps I won’t even need that stupid pirate’s help, in the long run... at the very least, if my scheme works, I will be able to weaken the barrier and the magic of that wretched Empire quite considerably.”

“I still don’t see how, my Lady.” Rumiya frowned. “Is there something you can do, then, from this place?”

“Lady Sasami is flesh and blood.” Ramia whispered, moving towards her wooden chest and running her finger lovingly across the carved characters that adorned the top. “Just like you, Haki, Misao, and my late husband. Tsunami might be divine, but she has an earthly form... through which I can attack her very soul.”

“You’re going to kill the Princess Sasami?” Rumiya stared.

“You disapprove?” Ramia asked lightly. Rumiya bit his lip.

“But she’s just a girl, like Misao-sama.” He said hesitantly. “She’s younger than me.”

“And she shouldn’t have interfered in my plans, if she didn’t want to invoke my anger.” Ramia said implacably. “No, Rumiya, this is no time for your soft heart. The girl has thrown her opening gambit and I must meet it.”

She cast him a sharp look.

“You know what this means from you, don’t you, my servant?” She asked softly. Rumiya looked troubled, but he nodded his head.

“You need something of Lady Sasami’s, don’t you?” He asked sadly. Ramia nodded.

“You learn quickly.” She said approvingly. “Yes. As soon as possible — there is no time to waste. I must have something belonging to the Princess, in order to quicken the doll which will hold her soul.”

“Can you really bewitch a deity with your magic, Ramia-sama?” Rumiya asked hesitantly. “If she really is Tsunami, can you truly bring her down with your spells? Even if Sasami-sama is flesh and blood, surely she has greater spiritual protection than anyone else in this universe?”

Ramia let out a slow, amused chuckle.

“Tsunami has her weaknesses.” She said softly. “Arian magic has always been considered alien by the Juraian, because it is so effective at bringing them to their knees. It won’t be the first time Tsunami has faced the wrath and the power of Arian dark arts... why do you think Airai has always been looked down on by the Imperial Family and their supporters? They fear us. They fear what we can do, if we put our minds to the cause. Some cults of Airai are softhearted and weak, and have no interest in power or domination. But my people are strong and decisive... our magic passed down from mage to mage through

many centuries of training and spiritual dedication. Tsunami may think she is an all powerful Goddess, but she is not infallible. Our magic focuses on corruption of the soul and the spirit, bending it to the will of the mage who holds it in her hands. Tsunami has faced such corruption before... and it would have succeeded, if not for the fact the warlock who wielded the power against her was weakened by his own Juraian blood. I have no such weakness... she will not find me such an easy enemy to defeat.”

Rumiya eyed his mistress uncertainly, taking in the fanatical gleam in her amber eyes as she spoke of the world she had left behind, and instinctively he took a step away from her, as flickers of magic danced around her body, illuminating her briefly in an eerie reddish glow. Then, as soon as it had come, it was gone, and Ramia eyed him with a calm, amused smile.

“You have truly no idea what I am capable of.” She said softly, touching his cheek gently as she did so. “But you will see, Rumiya. I am the most powerful mage of my people, she to whom the family’s dark power was passed in its entirety. Tsunami will meet her match this time.”

“What did you mean, Ramia-sama, when you said she’d faced corruption such as this before?” Rumiya asked trepidantly. Ramia’s expression became pensive, and she sighed, turning back towards the window.

“Some time past, there was a Prince of Jurai who sought to awaken Arian magic within his heart.” She said quietly. “He was born of a son of our people, and a Princess of the Empire, and though he sought to hide his blood illegitimacy, he still strove to bind himself to the magic through which we had controlled our dependants for generations. His father was one who turned his back on his heritage and tried to escape it’s ties, but the son was eager to grasp everything he could about the power that flowed through his veins. When things became hard and he was forced to flee his homeland, he came to us and we taught him all he needed to know. My own father guided his hand and he was a good student. He might have been strong enough to take out Tsunami once and for all, if not for the fact of his mother’s Juraian blood.”

She sighed again, shaking her head sadly.

“I was still just a girl, really.” She remembered. “But I remember him as clear as if it were yesterday. Such a handsome, ruthless man — I would have gladly become his bride, had he so asked it of me. But his gaze was fixed on the throne of Jurai. We saw great potential in him — that if he grasped power in his own name, we might make

gains of our own. Our cult could spread through Juraian country, gaining power and influence for our people, and forcing more people to our will. It was a great opportunity, but it was all for nothing.”

She spread her hands, shrugging her shoulders.

“He was just a half-blood.” She said finally. “And his royal ties to Tsunami meant that he could not kill the Goddess without extinguishing his own life. He needed her to live, because he had woken Jurai’s power within him before he had even come to us. He was doomed to fail, and for that reason, my father forbade me to enter into any alliance with him. Father’s prophecy came to pass... the Prince was defeated and his soul laid to rest by Juraian magic. But he wounded Tsunami’s very heart, and began to poison her land. Imagine, then, what someone of pure Arian blood might accomplish, if she truly put her mind to it!”

Rumiya swallowed hard, eying her with fearful eyes.

“You speak of the Dark Prince, Kagato, don’t you?” He whispered. Ramia was startled, then she smiled.

“So you do listen to gossip around this court, even when not asked to do so by me.” She observed absently. “Yes, that is the Prince of whom I speak.”

She flexed her hands, gazing thoughtfully out across the horizon towards the Council complex.

“It will be a pleasure to lock wits with a Goddess.” She said frankly. “Go, Rumiya, and do my bidding. Tsunami will learn that there are forces which she cannot so easily fight, and I will not be so easy to quash as my half-blooded cousin was.”

Rumiya eyed her with a heavy heart, but he obediently spread his arms, morphing himself back into the form of the blue bird as he fluttered out of the tower window, heading across the landscape towards the Council complex itself. As he flew, he felt sure Ramia’s golden eyes were on him, watching his every move and a prickle of uncertainty flickered up his spine.

“I knew she was powerful, and dangerous, if crossed.” He murmured. “After all, does she not hold my soul in that box of hers? She could slay me with a mere flash of temper. But that she might be able to challenge one such as Tsunami... it never occurred to me that she might have a power that terrible. If she is right, and she truly can attack the Goddess who protects Jurai, what will it mean for everyone else? Those who share Jurai’s royal blood may also be doomed —

after all, did she not just say that Prince Kagato failed because he needed Tsunami to live? Can I really help her to do such a thing — something which may cause the deaths of hundreds or thousands of people, if she should succeed?”

He swooped down onto the roof of the Council complex, ruffling his feathers as he judged how far he was from the Princess’s chamber.

“But what else can I do?” He wondered aloud. “She holds my soul, after all. And Misao-sama’s, also. Who knows what she might do to either of us, if I should disobey her? Sasami-sama is a foreigner, and I have no ties to Jurai. My people have lived on Yousai for a long time before Imperial rule, and they’ve never been involved with that planet or its interests. I should stop worrying about things that don’t concern me, and focus on the well-being of those who do matter. Rumiya, you must do as Lady Ramia says. Whatever the consequences — they will be Jurai’s to deal with. Not yours.”

With that grim decision, he spread his wings once more, fluttering down onto the window-ledge of the Princess’s room and walking carefully along the sill. Sasami was inside, he could see that clearly, curled up beneath her bedcovers as she slept off her efforts in the city earlier on. He flapped his wings, flying down onto the bedside unit as he watched the girl sleep, drawing gentle, even breaths into her lungs as she did so. There was a peaceful, untroubled expression on her young face as she dreamed, and for a moment, Rumiya was reminded of Misao, lost somewhere in the depths of space at the mercy of brigands or troublemakers. He faltered, unsettled by the sensation.

“Lady Sasami!”

A voice came from the doorway behind him, followed by the sweeping silver glint of a light-blade, jerking Rumiya back to his senses and causing him to launch himself up into the air, letting out a raucous cry of alarm as he did so. A man stood before him, long fair hair cascading over his shoulder in a messy tail as he lifted his blade for another strike, and Rumiya gathered his wits, uttering another loud cry as he soared up towards the ceiling of the chamber. There was determination in the young man’s eyes, and Rumiya recognised him in an instant as one of Sasami’s party of travellers from Jurai.

“What’s going on?” A sleepy voice from the bed alerted Rumiya to the fact his prey had awoken, sleepily rubbing her eyes as she pulled herself into a sitting position. “Yurikage-sama, what are you doing?”

“There’s a bird in your room, Princess.” Yurikage set his teeth, leaping up towards Rumiya’s unstable perch, and wielding his sword

once more. This time it made contact with Rumiya's feathers and with a screech of surprise, Rumiya felt burning pain sear through his flesh to the bones beneath. He clattered to the floor, shock and alarm flooding his body as he fought to regain his composure. Every sense urged him to change back into his human form and flee, and it was with some determination he resisted the urge to give himself away, even as Yurikage raised his sword towards him again. "Do not worry, I will see it gone!"

"Yurikage-sama, stop it!" Sasami's protestation caused the blade to freeze in mid-air, and Rumiya struggled to right himself, uttering a reproachful caw at the confused Lord as he did so.

"It's just a bird, Lord Motonoya." Sasami's tones were chiding. "I know you want to protect me, but he probably just flew in the window. Did you hurt him? Let me see."

She pushed back her bedcovers, setting her feet on the floor as she approached Rumiya's frightened form, but this proved too much for the young page boy. Ignoring the pain in his wing, he launched himself into flight, searing past her and out of the window as he sought sanctuary somewhere away from the fair-haired lord and his flashing blade. As he left the room, he could hear the young princess reproaching her guardian for his over-zealous attitude, and a grim sense of irony washed over him.

"Did he know what I was, or was he really just being overprotective?" He muttered to himself, dropping in through the window of an empty barn-house as his form flickered and blurred back into his human one. "Damn him — how did his blade brush through Ramia-sama's protective spell?"

He glanced at his arm, eying the blood that seeped though onto his shabby clothing, and he bit his lip.

"Careless." He murmured. "And I'll have to go back. Ramia-sama will punish me if I don't, and I can't risk that. But how will I get past that mad nobleman's sword? What is it made of, if it can cut through the magic of an Arian protective spell?"

"But Princess, I only sought to protect you." Back in the Princess's chamber, Yurikage had sheathed his blade, eying his companion with a mixture of confusion and dismay. "The bird had an evil look in its eye, and I think it meant to peck at you. You don't know what the creatures of this world might be capable of — and with Lady Misao kidnapped and Lord Tennan away, it is my responsibility to keep you

safe!”

“I know you meant to protect me, Yurikage-sama.” Sasami sighed, sitting back down on her bed as she wound her fingers absently through her hair. “But I’m sure it was just a bird who flew in looking for food. I hope you didn’t hurt it — I thought I saw blood on the wing.”

“It was only a glancing blow... I knocked him away from you.” Yurikage said frankly. “I swear, Princess, I thought he was going to peck your eyes out. He had that look about him — the look of a hunter.”

“Well, whatever he was, he’s gone now.” Sasami drew her wrap more tightly around her. “I know you’re on edge, too. We all are, I suppose. But there’s nothing wrong, now. The bird has gone.”

“I’m sorry I disturbed your sleep, Sasami-hime.” Yurikage looked penitent. “It was not my intention.”

“That’s all right.” Sasami assured him, taking in the genuine repentance in his eyes with a smile. “I know that. You only ever look out for my well being and I’m glad you do. But I don’t think that means you have to slay every wild animal that comes into the building, that’s all. Your blade is strong — but it wasn’t designed to fight off a menagerie.”

“It was forged from Arian steel on the instruction of my father’s father’s father.” Yurikage said proudly, running his finger gently along the decorated hilt. “It’s well known in the universe that there is no metal stronger or more decisive in battle than that mined from Airai’s mountains. The Arians may be heathens, but I charged it with pure energy from Tsunami’s central shrine, before we left Jurai. I seek to protect you with your own magic, Sasami-sama... my blade and I both do.”

“I realise that.” Sasami nodded. “But if you don’t mind, Lord Motonoya, I’d like to return to sleep now. I’m still tired from earlier, and I know that as soon as any news comes from Seiryō-sama and Kamidake that you’ll wake me at once.”

“As my Princess wishes.” Yurikage bowed his head. “But I will be right outside the door, should you need me.”

With that he withdrew, shutting the sliding door behind him, and Sasami sighed, settling herself once more on her pillows as she closed her eyes.

“Sometimes he’s just too over the top.” She murmured. “But I



suppose he means well. And with Mi-chan still missing, I guess I can understand why he's so keen to protect me. I should just be glad of it, I suppose... at least I have strong allies willing to fight in my name, even if it is just against lost wild parrots!"

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"Well, Ryo Ohki? Can you detect any sign of Karasu's vapour trail?"

Ryoko ran her fingers carefully over her ship's controls as Ryo Ohki seared through space, uttering a loud yowl as her crystals hovered and danced around the pilot's seat. There was reproach and hesitation in the craft's thought patterns, and Ryoko sighed, glancing ruefully at her hands.

"Sometimes I wish you didn't know my thoughts, Ryo Ohki." She muttered. "I know I told Washu I wasn't going to do anything crazy or go chasing after Karasu. But you know what Jiro told me — he was here. Can we really let him hunt us down when he chooses? He's playing a strange game, and I don't understand what it is. But I don't like being stalked prey."

Ryo Ohki mewed again, dropping her crystals to surround the cowering figure of the girl that huddled against the control panel, wide, frightened eyes taking in her surroundings. Ryoko cast her charge a momentary glance, then she groaned.

"All right, already. I know." She said resignedly. "You win. Jiro did ask us to take her to somewhere safe and I guess that if we did go after Haki, he might well hurt her. Either way, she'd slow me down, wouldn't she? I guess that won't work. I'm just so fed up with it, that's all — I know he's out there, but I don't know how or why and it's starting to really bug me."

"Who are you talking to?"

A faint voice from the girl startled Ryoko and she frowned, eying the girl in confusion.

"Pardon me?"

"You're talking to someone." Misao spoke hesitantly. "But there's noone else here. Who is... who is Ryo Ohki?"

"Ryo Ohki is the spaceship." Ryoko said slowly. "Why?"

Misao's eyes opened wide with fear at this, and she huddled herself more tightly in her blankets, shaking her head.

"The man spoke to his ship, too." She whispered. "Are you like

him? He said he was a pirate... are you a pirate too?"

"What man?" Ryoko narrowed her gaze, dropping down on the floor in front of her companion and crossing her legs in front of her. "What man are you talking about, Misao? I can't answer your question unless you answer mine."

Ryo Ohki let out a howl at this moment, and Ryoko turned her gaze towards the control panel, offering her ship a wry smile.

"You don't need me to chart the way home. You know where you're going, so get to it." She instructed playfully. "I'm sure there'll be carrots in it for you, if you're quick and smooth."

A yowl of joy greeted this final statement as the craft shifted her course, and Ryoko turned her gaze back on the frightened girl that cowered before her.

"Well?" She demanded. "What man do you mean?"

"I... I..." Misao faltered, tears welling in her aqua eyes at the brusqueness of Ryoko's tone, and the pirate cursed, shaking her head.

"Oh, don't cry on me." She ordered. "I don't like tears... just tell me. You mentioned a man. Did this man bring you to Jiro's space station?"

Misao eyed her uncertainly, then nodded her head.

"So you do remember more than Jiro thought you did." Ryoko pursed her lips. "Right. Good. Then you can tell me exactly how you came to be abandoned in one of the most notorious space haunts in existence, can't you? That's no place for a young girl — this man, he didn't happen to leave a name?"

Misao swallowed hard, fear sparkling in her aquamarine eyes, and Ryoko sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Look, I'm not a pirate." She said at length. "I might have been, once, but I'm not any more. And I'm not going to hurt you... although you are trying my patience like crazy right now, with all this weeping and hesitating. I asked you a question — could you answer it, please? I'm trying to help you, but I can't unless you help me?"

Misao swallowed again, then,

"I don't know his name." She admitted unsteadily. "But he was tall. And... and he had scary eyes. They looked right through me."

Ryoko's eyes narrowed as she considered this.

“His ship, then?” She asked at length. “Do you remember anything about his ship? You said he spoke to it — did he call it by name?”

“I... I don’t know.” Misao faltered. “I... I don’t really remember. I think... there was a bird, and then... I might have been dreaming. I’m not sure.”

“A bird?” Ryoko eyed her sharply. “A blue parrot, by any chance?”

Misao looked startled, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed, then, “Oh no! Are you a friend of his?”

“Of the parrot or the man who seems to have become his new best friend?” Ryoko demanded. “Don’t be silly. I don’t befriend pirates or birds, and I don’t involve children in adult games. Will you stop freaking out on me and get a grip on yourself, please? You’re no younger than Sasami and she never falls to pieces when you speak to her!”

“Sasami?” Recognition flashed into Misao’s aqua eyes at this, and suddenly the girl’s demeanour changed, as two thin, pale hands shot out from the mass of blankets, grasping Ryoko’s gloved fingers tightly in hers. “Oh! Are you... are you a friend of the Lady Sasami of Jurai?”

“You know Sasami too, huh?” Ryoko nodded. “Yes, I am. Let me go, will you? I need my fingers and I’m quite fond of them — I don’t need them broken by a limpet of a girl.”

“If you are a friend of Sasami’s, then I know you won’t hurt me.” Relief seemed to flood through the young girl’s body. “I was so afraid... all those people... I thought they might hurt me.”

“Well, you might say that Sasami and I are distant relations.” Ryoko said simply. “We share blood, if you go far enough up the family tree.”

“You’re Juraian?” Hope flickered in Misao’s aqua eyes. “Is that where we’re going — to Jurai?”

“Not to Jurai, but somewhere just as safe.” Ryoko assured her. “It’s a planet called Earth, where you can clean up and have something to eat. We’re not far from the Solar System now — we’ll be arriving soon.”

She paused, eying the girl carefully.

“The man who snatched you — did he have his face covered by a black cloth?” She asked softly. “And a wild tail of black hair down his back?”

“Yes.” Misao twisted her fingers together, nodding her head. “Only

there was silver in his hair, too. Streaks of it, like moondust. He was so scary... I never saw anyone like him before!”

“So age is finally catching up with the old bastard, is it?” Ryoko smirked. “You’re a lucky kid, if that’s the case. Haki is the kind of pirate who kills first and asks questions later. You’re fortunate he didn’t rip your throat out on the spot.”

Misao paled, and for a moment Ryoko was afraid the child might faint. She cursed, gripping the girl tightly by the shoulders.

“Don’t go sissy on me.” She warned. “I don’t know what to do with fainting, weeping kids, so don’t make me try. When we get to the Earth, I’ll find someone who might know better than I do what to do, but for the time being, at least pretend you have some spunk inside of you, okay?”

Misao stared at her for a moment, then,

“What was your name again, miss?” She asked softly. “Did the man at the bar say... Ryoko?”

“Yes. Ryoko.” Ryoko agreed. “Ryoko Hakubi. And your name is Misao, although that’s pretty much all I know about you so far. How about a few more details, huh? Like who you are and where you’re from?”

“My name is Misao Amano, Lady of the Shizukasari.” Misao said soberly. “And I come from a planet called Yousai. They must be worried about me... they never let me go far outside the Council halls, let alone deep into space like this.”

“Yousai, huh?” Ryoko’s eyes flickered with interest. “The planet that’s famous for its gems?”

“Yes.” Misao looked surprised. “Do you know it?”

“Every pirate for miles around knows it.” Ryoko said dryly. “Trust me, the space depository where all the mined jewels are stored gets hit on a regular basis. But I guess you wouldn’t know much about that, since it’s out in space beyond Yousai’s orbit, and you said you don’t go out much. I guess you don’t even know half of the things that go on around your little cocoon world, do you?”

“No.” Misao admitted. “Are you really not a pirate, Miss Ryoko?”

“Well, not an active one.” Ryoko said carefully. “And not all pirates are like Haki, anyway. There are quite a few who have a code of honour and stick to it, where children are concerned. I’ve never killed anyone, yet, and I don’t mean to start by killing you — so you can

stop worrying. I could have gone after that creep and drummed some answers out of him if not for you, but I'm taking you back with me instead... that should tell you I'm not some ruthless murderer who's just trying to gain your trust."

"I didn't mean that." Misao flushed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I never met a pirate before today."

"Well, pray that you never do again." Ryoko said frankly. "And this is it. We're entering the Earth's atmosphere now, kid — can you stand up? This is a view you ought to see."

Misao struggled to her feet, coming to stand hesitantly beside Ryoko as she gazed down at the approaching mass of blue and green, shrouded as it was with the wispy white clouds that dotted the sky. She let out a little gasp of surprise and pleasure, and Ryoko shot her a sidelong grin.

"Pretty, ain't it?" She remarked casually, as if she had been personally responsible for putting the planet together. "Welcome to the Earth. It's a long way from your Yousai, but you can at least get some rest. Ryo Ohki will need to take a break anyhow — she's done a lot of flying today, so you better resign yourself to a quick holiday on my planet. We'll work out a way to get you home, but for the time being, this is our destination."

"It's truly amazing." Misao pressed her hands to the glass of Ryo Ohki's dome. "I can't imagine anything bad happening on a planet so pretty as that."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." Ryoko responded, amused by her companion's simplicity. "But it is relatively safe. And certainly not a haunt frequented by pirates. Brace yourself, kid. We're going in to land."

# Chapter 10

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## Chapter Ten

“It seems a hopeless case.”

Kamidake stepped away from the window panels of the Unko, casting his companion a pensive glance as the sleek silver ship swept through space, passing deftly between meteor clusters and nearby planets as it headed deeper into the black. “Haki’s black ship Karasu is a fast vessel, and unless we can pick up the vapour trail, I don’t see how we’re going to track him down. He already has a head start on us, and we don’t know where to begin looking. How can we locate the Lady Misao without even the slightest clue where she is?”

“That’s the kind of defeatist attitude I don’t expect from a knight of Tsunami, Kamidake.” Seiryō said quietly, flipping the switch of his craft to auto-pilot as he got to his feet, coming to join the other man at the glass. “Although you do have a good point. We are looking for a needle in a haystack — the worst kind of pursuit when the ship you seek is camouflaged against the night sky and ours is far from discreet in comparison.”

He frowned, casting a glance around him for the Shizukasari Lord, and Kamidake, guessing his thoughts, offered a wry smile.

“Lord Hirayama has retired to rest.” He said softly. “It seems he is not accustomed to space travel at this kind of speed.”

“What are these people thinking?” Seiryō demanded, incredulity in his teal eyes. “I knew Hirayama’s son and he was a dedicated, focused agent who would have run through fire to solve a case. How can his line be so feeble? But it’s that planet, isn’t it? The whole lot of them, like a group of flustered, uncoordinated chickens running wild around their coop because a fox has broken through the fencing.”

“An apt description.” Kamidake’s smile widened, and humour flickered in his grave violet eyes. “But we shouldn’t judge them too harshly. Jurai faces a lot more conflict than a world like Yousai does. It is protected by the Emperor and his forces, after all. And normally, it is at peace.”

“Yes, so I believe.” Seiryō grimaced. “Perhaps it’s not a good thing, if it means the population are so badly equipped to deal with a crisis. If we had not been there, Kamidake, do you realise that they’d still be

running in circles bemoaning the kidnap of their Lady, without a clue what to do to resolve it?”

“More, without Lady Sasami’s magic, that tower of theirs would have been brought to the ground.” Kamidake said thoughtfully. “It concerns me more than a little, to be honest. That such a dangerous force should be sealed on a planet without adequate forces to defend it.”

“You feel that way too?” Seiryō asked. “I’m glad I’m not the only one. I think when we finally do return to Jurai, we need to pass some information in Lord Azusa’s direction about that place. Peaceful it may be, but that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be able to defend itself from outside attack. At this rate it might be more technologically advanced than the Earth, but it’s significantly behind in basic protection methods. And that’s something I never thought I’d say, but thanks to Washu’s dabbling, even the Earth has rudimentary atmospheric shields that at least warn of impending ships in the vicinity.”

“Well, Washu-san does like a project to get her teeth into. Perhaps we should recommend she visit Yousai, next time we see her.” Kamidake suggested dryly, and Seiryō grinned, nodding his head appreciatively.

“Perhaps we should.” He agreed, resting his hands against the glass panes as he peered out into space. “But as for the Black Ship, Karasu — Kamidake, you’ve encountered this man before, haven’t you? He fired a shot at the Tsunami-fune on one occasion — is that correct?”

“Yes, he did.” Kamidake’s eyes became grave and he nodded his head. “And it was a blast meant to kill — a lesser ship would have been destroyed. As it was, Tsunami-fune suffered some damage, but considering the nature of her design, she was able to repair large elements of herself as we continued our journey. However, the blast also knocked my lady Princess from her position in control of the craft. I believe that Tsunami-sama reached her magic through to Lady Sasami’s soul to protect her... otherwise she would not have survived.”

“I see.” Seiryō looked thoughtful. “It would seem that this craft is designed simply to kill and destroy, and nothing else.”

“I believe that it’s soul is interlinked with that of the pilot. What Haki’s will is, Karasu’s has become.” Kamidake shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t understand all of the technicalities, but that’s my belief.”

“So I have also heard.” Seiryō admitted. “So, you think we should

continue our pursuit?"

"Yes, I do." Kamidake said firmly. "We have to do our best to recover the Lady Misao, you know that. Unless you want to return and tell Lady Sasami that we'd given up because we couldn't find the vessel in amongst all the darkness... I think we should continue. In the meantime, we'll just have to hope that Lady Misao is alive and safe, and that if Haki chooses to return for another assault on Yousai, Sasami-hime's magic is equal to the task."

"Don't you mean Tsunami's magic?" Seiryō looked startled. Kamidake shook his head.

"I don't believe so." He said pensively. "Lady Sasami was exhausted by the attempt — as if she'd used up a large amount of her own strength in repelling Haki's attack. Tsunami bolsters her, it's true, but at the end of the day, they are one and the same person. Tsunami split their spirit into two when Sasami-hime was born, so that the Princess could grow and develop without the burden placed on her head. I still feel that Karasu's blast into Tsunami-fune is what woke Tsunami-sama inside my Princess, though I have no proof. Since then the Goddess has only become stronger and more firmly entwined in Sasami-hime's life and actions. Eventually the two sides of the spirit will be put back together into one, and Tsunami and Sasami will be the same person completely. But that Sasami seems to be accessing Tsunami's reserves of magic is a sign to me that their connection continues to gather strength."

"All of this is a bit beyond me." Seiryō admitted. "I only believe that Sasami is who she says she is because I've heard it from so many sources. What you're saying is that our Princess, the second child of Lord Haru and Lady Misaki, is truly the reborn spirit of a dead Priestess who lived generations into Jurai's past... aren't you?"

"The legend never speaks of Tsunami-sama's death, no." Kamidake shook his head. "The story only tells that she sank into the core of the planet and became one with Jurai's heart. She didn't die — she combined her generosity of spirit with the living force that already resided in the depths of our world. She became beyond flesh and blood, true — but there's never been any evidence to suggest that the tribal Princess Tsunami ever passed away. No grave has been found, no shrine or repository storing her bones or ashes. She just disappeared into the heart of the world and from then on, Jurai flourished."

"You don't really believe that happened, do you?" Seiryō looked sceptical. Kamidake nodded solemnly.



“With all my heart.” He said simply. “Tsunami simply let go of her human form to become sealed to the planet. And now she’s regained it, that’s all — in the form of the Lady Sasami.”

“Well, think what you like, but I think the resurrection theory is bizarre enough without adding eternal life and body-shedding to the equation.” Seiryō said pragmatically. “However, if all you say is true, it does mean that Sasami-sama should be able to hold off any more attacks from Karasu in our absence. Right?”

“Possibly.” Kamidake nodded his head. “If she’s recovered her strength enough to wield the magic again. She’s just a child, when all is said and done. It’s a lot for her to deal with. Tsunami might be divine, but Sasami-sama is still just a girl with fears and doubts like the rest of us. We already ask much of her.”

“You’re very fond of that girl, aren’t you.” Seiryō observed thoughtfully, sending his companion a sidelong glance, and Kamidake started, staring at him in consternation.

“What do you mean? I’m sworn to protect and defend her with my life — as a Knight of Tsunami, that is my duty to Jurai and the Imperial Family.”

“Perhaps, but I meant on a more personal level.” Seiryō said evenly. “You seem to be great friends, you and the young Princess Sasami. Am I wrong?”

“No, of course not.” Kamidake frowned. “I’d like to believe we are friends. Why should we not be? Sasami-sama is the kind of person who attracts people to her, and I’m not ashamed to be one of them. I enjoy the Princess’s company — my duties are never a burden.”

“I see.” Seiryō pursed his lips. “And what do you make of Lord Motonoya? In light of your duty, Kamidake, do you think such a cretin of a nobleman should be courting our Lady Princess so blatantly without Lord Haru’s consent?”

“I’m not sure that he’s courting her, exactly.” Kamidake’s expression became thoughtful, although Seiryō detected a flicker of wary apprehension in the violet eyes. “As you said, Lord Haru hasn’t given consent, and nor has my Lord Emperor. But he is of good breeding, and would not shame Lady Sasami in terms of his bloodline or his position at Court. I don’t think that it would be a disapproved match, if that’s your implication. He’s young, and maybe he’s impulsive. But he has a well-meaning heart. I think that Lady Sasami could do much worse.”

“You’d support it then, this match, if she was to ask your advice?” Seiryō looked quizzical. Kamidake stared at his companion for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“I already told her that she should consider it properly, and not dismiss it out of hand.” He said carefully. “After all, a Princess of Jurai should marry a Lord who befits her station. Especially one who holds Jurai’s Goddess within her heart.”

“I think she holds more than Tsunami within her heart, Kamidake.” Seiryō said frankly, eying the mixture of emotions that flashed across the knight’s face. “And I don’t think she will marry Yurikage Motonoya. You seem to forget that she has a strong will, our Princess. And she won’t make a marriage match unless she truly feels it to be right.”

“Lord Tennan, may I ask where you are going with this?” Kamidake questioned. Seiryō smiled, shaking his head slowly.

“Nowhere I suppose.” He said reflectively. “As you are, I am a friend of the Lady Sasami. And I have concerns for her future and her current well-being. That’s all.”

“I see.” Kamidake eyed Seiryō long and hard for a moment, then, “I almost wondered, if you don’t mind the insinuation, whether you had considered approaching Lord Haru for Lady Sasami’s hand yourself, my Lord.”

“You know, once upon a time I would probably have struck a palace knight for making that kind of suggestion.” Seiryō said levelly. “But I happen to respect you, and I certainly don’t consider you my inferior in any regard. You are, after all, chosen of Tsunami-kami-sama. But you can rest assured that I have no aspirations to wed the Princess Sasami. I believe she will grow into a fine, strong woman, and that she will make the Goddess’s legacy proud. But I have no desire to take her as my wife. For one thing, I have no interest in marriage at all... certainly not at present, anyway. And for another, her spiritual connections would unsettle me. I am a realist, Kamidake... not a religious man. I wouldn’t want to be so closely interwoven with divine magic. Remember, I’ve already suffered at the hands of one powerful would-be Goddess. I won’t chance another, for all the gold or power on Jurai.”

“My apologies.” Kamidake’s expression twitched into a sheepish smile. “For the forwardness of my suggestion as much as for my not thinking it through. I had forgotten your dealings with the Lady Tokimi, Lord Tennan. It was inappropriate of me.”

“No, I prefer people who dare to be direct.” Seiryō shook his head. “And now you know the answer to your question. I just don’t believe Yurikage-dono to be a suitable consort for Jurai’s Goddess-in-waiting. I’m surprised that you do.”

“I don’t believe it’s really my place to judge those things.” Kamidake turned back towards the window. “So it’s immaterial, what I think.”

“I doubt the Lady Sasami feels that way about it.” Seiryō said softly, and Kamidake eyed his companion sharply.

“I don’t understand your meaning.”

“I think you do.” Seiryō said simply, offering him a benign smile. “In the meantime, this little discourse is fascinating, but not helping us to trace Karasu’s trail. It would help to have access to his police file, I suppose — but when I left the Galaxy Police, that part of the Unko’s database was erased completely. I don’t have Washu’s powers of hacking signals, so I haven’t any way of retrieving it, sadly. Aside from your brief encounter and the little I can remember, we don’t know much about this man or what drives him on.”

“Maybe we do.” Kamidake’s brows knitted together as he considered the situation. “Haki was once an associate of the Lady Ryoko. In fact, I believe they raided together. When Haki was sealed in his prison, it was Lady Ryoko, Lady Ayeka and Lord Tenchi who put the spell on him, and Washu-sensei was the one who sent him into subspace. Since he sought out gems which were, at that time, in Ryoko-san’s possession, it seems possible that he might try to take them from her again. Or at least, that might be his intention.”

“Lady Ryoko...” Seiryō’s eyes narrowed until they were little more than slits. “She still has these gems?”

“They became part of her, when she fought against the traitor Kagato in Jurai’s name.”

“I wish you’d stop speaking in that melodramatic way.” Seiryō grimaced at his companion. “You could simply say that they assimilated when Kagato was beaten.”

“I come from a different era from you.” Kamidake shrugged. “I apologise if my speech offends you, Lord Tennan.”

“You know, that’s your problem, Kamidake.” Seiryō decided, as he moved back towards the ship’s dashboard, bringing a detailed space-map up on the Unko’s expansive, glittering monitor. “You never seem to take offence at anything, and you’re always ready to apologise and

make peace.”

“What on earth do you mean, my Lord?” Kamidake stared at his companion, bewildered, and Seiryō shrugged his shoulders.

“Just that you might avoid making enemies with that strategy, but I doubt you’ll win friends, either.” He said frankly, flipping carefully through screen after screen as he hunted for the one he wanted. “Social etiquette and court manners are one thing, but you can be too self-effacing, and if you’re not careful, it’s going to cost you more than just the chance to be taken seriously by more people. You have a will and a voice, Kamidake, and I’ve heard about what kind of a fighter you are. You have a Princess on Jurai who you are sworn to defend, and yet you don’t even defend her against an unsuitable fool of a suitor. Bloodlines and chivalry will blind you, if you’re not careful... you owe Sasami-sama more than just your official attention and your indifference.”

“What are you saying?” Kamidake looked stricken, and Seiryō offered him a droll smile.

“You are a man, not a puppet and not a tool.” He said softly. “Remember it, and don’t be afraid to admit it.”

“You have some strange ideas.” Kamidake looked annoyed, coming to peer at the map over his shoulder. “Where are we going, anyway? What are your intentions, Lord Tennan?”

“There you go again. Lord Tennan, when I have already told you I consider you my equal.” Seiryō wheeled on him, grabbing him firmly by the shoulders and meeting his gaze. “I don’t believe you are as dense as that fool Yurikage, but I might be wrong. He believes that he is destined to marry Lady Sasami, and he never will. Her heart isn’t his and it won’t ever be. But you believe you will never be anything more to that Princess than her guardian and her supporter. And so you will be, if you continue to give deference to unsuitable, foolish idiots with floppy blond hair and a penchant for wielding swords at reckless moments.”

Kamidake stared at Seiryō in abject horror, struck speechless by the implications of his companion’s words. Seiryō spread his hands.

“Who is the bigger fool... you or him?” He asked pragmatically. “I’m really not sure, when I review the evidence. But I do know which one is more likely to break the Princess’s heart, when all is said and done.”

“You overstep yourself.” At last Kamidake found his voice, his hand

hovering briefly over his weapon as he fought to bring his temper under control. “What you suggest is ludicrous and disrespectful to the Princess you are sworn to serve! She is a lady and a Goddess-in-waiting — how dare you imagine that I would ever entertain any thoughts of that nature about someone I care so much to serve? She is my mistress, and that is all she will ever be! I have no aspirations of grandeur... I wish only to serve my Princess in whatever way I can!”

“Ah. I knew you must have some emotion inside of you, somewhere.” Seiryō seemed amused by his companion’s indignation. “I’m glad to see it. I don’t believe a word of it, but I’m glad all the same.”

“Lord Tennan, stop disrespecting Lady Sasami in this manner!”

“*You* stop disrespecting her.” Seiryō said bluntly. “And start paying closer attention to the girl, when she speaks to you. I think you’ll find I know more than you do. I may no longer have the Kii sight instilled in me, but I’m a man of enough sense to call a horse a horse, if it presents itself to me.”

Kamidake gritted his teeth, his hand grasping loosely around his weapon for a split-second, then, with a tremendous effort, he drew his fingers back, folding his arms across his chest. Seiryō eyed him with some interest, nodding his head slowly.

“And now, we should at least follow the only lead we seem to have.” He said nonchalantly, gesturing towards the screen. “Since you said Haki has connections with Lady Ryoko, I imagine that means we head to the Earth and see whether they’ve seen anything of her down there. I won’t pretend that it’s my favourite place to visit, at any time. But it’s the only thing I can think of... and I’m sure that, if I take a noble knight like yourself with me, we’ll both be fine.”

Kamidake sent him a look that was black as thunder, but he did not reply, and Seiryō knew he was fighting the urge to say something he would likely later regret. He let out a low chuckle, resting his hand on the knight’s shoulder.

“You are more than a Knight of Jurai to a lot of people, you know.” He said lightly. “I don’t mean to offend you or to disrespect the Princess we both swear our allegiance to. But Sasami values you in more ways than you know... and you will hurt her one day, if you refuse to see it. That’s all.”

Kamidake’s lips thinned, but he still made no attempt to speak, and Seiryō sighed.

“All right. Be that way.” He said resignedly. “We’ll see which of us is proven to be right.”

Kamidake’s brows knitted together, as he finally got a firm grasp on his composure and his emotions.

“We’ll go to the Earth, Lord Tennan.” He said quietly. “And ask Lady Ryoko and Lord Tenchi whether they can help us find the Lady Misao. I will go and wake Lord Hirayama, to tell him our plans. With a ship such as the Unko, it shouldn’t take us long to cross space to the Solar System.”

With that he was gone, the stiffness of his retreating figure indicative of his continuing anger, and Seiryō leant back against the glass panes of the Unko’s drive room, a thoughtful look on his face.

“Well, so now I know for sure that Washu is right.” He murmured. “It was pretty clear after Yugi was defeated that Sasami-sama was fond of Kamidake. But that the feelings were reciprocated... and now I know that they are. I suppose time will tell as to whether he’s man enough to do something about it as the girl grows..after all, in some respects, Tsunami makes her older than her years and quite able to look to her future at this early date. I certainly hope that he has the courage and the conviction. If Lady Sasami marries Lord Motonoya because Kamidake is a fool, then I may have to gut the idiot myself. Both of them, even. Motonoya is a half-wit and the future of Tsunami’s cult might rest on his head, if that stubborn, old-fashioned knight doesn’t recognise what’s right in front of him. Washu said he was chosen by Tsunami as Sasami’s protector, and I’m sure that means he was chosen to be more than just her bodyguard.”

He sighed, turning his gaze back to the flashing navigation screen.

“And now for planet Earth, the world who probably still view me as a destructive monster, with one man who’s unsteady on his space legs and another who seems angry enough to put a spear through my ribs if I turn my back on him for a moment.” He mused ironically. “Oh well. It makes life interesting, if nothing else. I think it’s a long shot, hoping that Ryoko and her companions know anything about Haki’s whereabouts. But right now it’s the best we have to go on, so so be it. Planet Earth it is!”

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“Are you feeling any better now, Misao?”

Yume cupped the mug of tea in her hands, gently testing it for temperature, and then handing it to the apprehensive young girl.

“Here you are. It’s hot, but it will help settle you. You’ve been through a lot, that’s clear enough — you’re lucky that Ryoko found you when she did.”

“I didn’t exactly find her.” Ryoko dropped down onto the floor rug with a sigh, shrugging her shoulders. “She was sort of wished on me, when I went asking an old friend for information. It seems that Haki took her prisoner, but then decided to ditch her unharmed at a place I know, deep in a dodgy sector of space. Jiro didn’t know what to do with her, so he dumped her onto me. Apparently because I was a woman, he thought I’d know what to do about her.”

“Jiro, huh?” Tenchi’s eyes flickered with recognition at the barman’s name. “Isn’t that the guy who runs that bar we went to, looking for Haki the last time he surfaced?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Ryoko inclined her head. “I’m surprised you remember that. I thought that it might be a good place to find information, and I was right — Haki had been there. But he’d gone by the time I got there, and with that kid on my hands, I couldn’t exactly go scouting for a vapour trail.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Washu put in from the doorway, eying her daughter meaningfully as she folded her arms across her chest. “Since you promised me you wouldn’t run off after Haki on your own.”

“I know.” Ryoko pinkened. “And I wasn’t really going to — not to fight him. I guess it just got to me a little, that’s all. He was in that bar, and he killed two of Jiro’s staff, just because he felt like it. There’s a code of mutual honour between patrons and staff of that place, after all — we don’t hurt them, and they don’t betray us. Jiro was upset about it and I can understand why. If pirates start thinking they can slay the people who serve the drinks, the entire system breaks down. Besides, it’s a dirty trick, taking advantage of unarmed people just because you’re in a bad mood. He makes me as sick now as he did when I knew him before.”

“But you did the right thing, bringing Misao here to the Earth.” Yume glanced up from her seat beside the still-shivering girl. “After all, Haki isn’t here, and she’s safe from whatever mischief he had planned for her.”

“I guess that there’s no doubt this pirate exists now, huh, Ikeda?” Sakura cast her companion a glance, and Hiroshi offered her a sheepish smile, holding up his hands.

“I surrender.” He said good-naturedly. “I guess I’m looking through tunnel-vision Earth eyes a bit too much — I’ll try and widen the range

a little.”

“Well, we’re glad that you’re alive, Misao-chan.” Washu settled herself on the couch between the two Earth students, offering the child a gentle smile, and Ryoko saw an almost maternal sparkle in her soft green eyes. “You must have been very scared.”

“Yes.” Misao agreed unsteadily, returning the smile with a shy one of her own. “But thank you for helping me. Especially Ryoko-san, for bringing me so far from that horrible man. I... I’m very grateful.”

“I’m sure it was her pleasure.” Tenchi cast his fiancée a rueful smile, and Ryoko grimaced back at him. “And you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need, while we try and get in touch with your homeworld. Yousai, did you say? I’ve not heard of it, but I’m sure that Washu or Ryoko have, and that somehow we’ll be able to send out a signal to them, letting them know that you’re safe here with us.”

“Yousai is a dependant of Jurai, Tenchi.” Washu nodded her head. “Famous for it’s gem production, among other things. The people are notoriously peaceful as a rule, and there is a lot of interracial cohabitation, thanks to the relaxed immigration attitude of the Council that rules. I believe the native population mostly belong to a clan called the Shizukasari, though I may be mistaken.”

“No, you’re not.” Misao offered another slight smile, taking a sip of her tea and then setting the mug down on the wood-finish table. “That is my people.”

“And you’re pretty important to them, I’d figure, if this pirate Haki decided to nab you?” Hiroshi eyed the girl with interest, rather as if he was sizing up a zoo exhibit, and Sakura dealt him a short, sharp elbow to the ribs, glaring at him pointedly.

“What?” Hiroshi was wounded, and Sakura rolled her eyes.

“You heathen.” She said wearily. “The girl’s scared, and the last thing she needs is an idiot like you gawping at her like she’s some circus show.”

“I was just looking to see if I could tell she was an alien, that’s all!” Hiroshi defended himself. “So far all the aliens I’ve seen look like people... I wanted to see if she was different from the others.”

Sakura groaned, shaking her head slowly.

“Misao-san, I apologise for him. He’s a moron.” She said succinctly. “Not everyone on the Earth is as rude, I promise.”

Misao smiled.



"Everyone has been nice to me." She acknowledged. "I'm not so scared any more. Not now I know you're friends of the Lady Sasami, who has been so good to me."

"If you know Sasami, then Hiroshi is probably right. You must be an important figure on Yousai, Misao-chan." Tenchi observed thoughtfully. "Someone worth kidnapping and ransoming, maybe, but something went wrong and Haki was interrupted. You said he went crazy on the bar, Ryoko. Perhaps that was why. Something happened to prevent him carrying out his plan where Misao was concerned."

"I am the Lady of Yousai." Misao nodded her head, her cheeks pinkening as she spoke the words. "But I'm not a very good one. At least, I'm only just the Lady, because I'm only just thirteen. But I really don't know much about what I'm supposed to do, yet. I'm too shy and I forget things... I'm really not a very good leader at all."

"You're only a child, though." Sakura said softly. "You can't expect to be able to lead a whole planet at that age, surely?"

"You'd be surprised." Washu said acidly. "I've known Lords and Kings of worlds who have been younger. And then there's Sasami herself, too. She might be only a teenager, but she's a Goddess's flesh and blood representative, strong enough to rule the spiritual side of Jurai's affairs and even marry, should she and her family decide it would be a good idea. Different planets have very different ideas of adult."

"Marry, at thirteen?" Sakura looked horrified. "But that's archaic! You must be kidding!"

"Not at all." Washu said serenely. "Remember, many marriages in illustrious families like the Family Jurai are politically based, not done on feelings and emotions. As I said, a very different world."

"Lady Sasami is so strong and confident." Misao sighed, looking sad. "I like her very much, but I wish I was more like her. She doesn't seem to be afraid of anyone or anything. She's come to our world and she doesn't know us at all, but she treats us all like we're old friends, and even wants to learn our stories and our customs. I know that that's the sort of Lady Yousai needs, but I don't know how to be that way. And that's why I'm weak and I get kidnapped by evil people like this Haki person. Because I'm not like Lady Sasami."

"Sasami is on Yousai at the moment, is she?" Ryoko looked startled. "That's an interesting coincidence if ever there was one. Haki attacks this planet, kidnaps Misao here... and there just happens to be representatives from Jurai in the area. Sasami was with us when we

imprisoned him, Washu — do you think that his target was her?”

“Then why did he take Misao?” Yume objected. “Haki might be mad, but it isn’t logical. If he knew Sasami from a prior acquaintance, he’d know which girl to go after.”

“I suppose so.” Ryoko acknowledged. “It just makes no sense to me. Nothing that he does makes sense to me! Since he’s been revived, he’s not come after Tenchi or I, and he’s randomly kidnapped a young girl, only to abandon her in space. And apart from the slayings at Jiro’s bar, he hasn’t gone all out to kill anyone, either. He’s attacked Yousai, a planet famed for its gemstone production, but aside from Misao, he doesn’t seem to have taken anything from there. And he’s completely ignored the fact that Sasami is on that planet, even though he must remember what happened to him when he was sealed.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t.” Tenchi suggested. “Maybe the spell addled his wits even more, or made him forget.”

“Well, I suppose that could be true.” Ryoko sighed, cupping her chin in her hands as she thought things over. “There is the matter of the blue parrot, after all.”

“Blue..what now?” Hiroshi stared at the pirate as if she had lost her mind, and Ryoko shrugged her shoulders.

“I didn’t actually see it, so I’m probably not the best person to try and explain.” She said simply. “But Misao told me that she saw a blue bird with Haki, when he left her at the space station.”

“I might have dreamed it, though.” Misao reminded her softly. “I’m still not sure what was real and what wasn’t. But I thought I felt the bird’s wing brush over me, so I thought that bit might be real, if nothing else was.”

“It’s not much to go on.” Washu looked thoughtful. “Haki’s ship is a Phoenix and its name is Karasu, the Raven — so there’s no doubt he already has an affiliation with all things feathered. Maybe he just decided to go the extra mile and get a pet — we are talking about someone with a warped brain, after all.”

“I think the bird spoke to him, though I couldn’t make out the words.” Misao creased her brow as she struggled to remember. “I’m sorry. I’m really not being a lot of use, am I?”

“Jiro said that Haki seemed to be having an argument with a blue bird, the first time he came to the bar in recent weeks.” Ryoko remembered. “A blue parrot, that’s what he said too.”

“So it sounds like Misao wasn’t dreaming at all.” Sakura sighed. “This whole thing is giving me the creeps, I have to admit. It sounds completely surreal, but the scary part is that it *is* real and all of this stuff really happened. Can you get talking birds? I mean, Ikeda has a point when he says all aliens *we’ve* met so far have been like people. But are there alien populations who don’t look like us?”

“Well, there are the Wau, I suppose.” Washu pondered, tilting her head on one side as she considered. “They’re not quite humanoid — more a blend of human and fox, or wolf. Most species have adapted in some way or another to mobile life, so have developed similar biological features to adapt to the worlds in which they live. Of course, there’s always room for deviation. And there is a theory which suggests that all forms of planetary life began with the same few tribal peoples, many, many millennia before even I was born, on a planet that has long since been split into fragments and divided up throughout the universe.”

“I remember something about a big bang theory at school.” Hiroshi frowned. “Is that what you mean, Miss Washu?”

“I suppose that’s as close as Earth has got to defining it, yes.” Washu agreed, her eyes sparkling with interest at the prospect of a scientific discussion. “But what scientists generally believe now is that the big bang was just one of a series of explosions that didn’t so much create the universe but divided it into it’s component atoms. That is where opinion divides on the matter, of course — the spiritual scientists believe that this was the work of several different planetary spirits who went on to possess and dominate worlds such as Jurai, Kihaku and other sentient lands. Practical scientists believe it was a huge collision of megalithic proportions that split the universe into its current state, caused by some shift in the time-space continuum. However...”

“Enough already.” Ryoko held up her hands, cutting across her mother in mid-flow. “We really don’t care, Washu. Let’s get back to the matter at hand, all right? Is there a planet that you know of where there are talking birds?”

“Not off the top of my head.” Washu shot the pirate a dark look. “You really are still so rude, musume-chan. We need to work on that.”

“Can it.” Ryoko glowered back at her. “So in your opinion, there can’t be any such thing as a bird who talks?”

“I don’t think I said that.” Washu shook her head. “There are a lot of ways the bird could have talked... it doesn’t mean there is or isn’t a

planet of exotic and highly advanced Minah birds out there in the cosmos.”

She glanced at Yume, offering her a smile.

“Yume, will you show Ryoko what I mean?” She asked genially, and Yume looked startled, then she smiled back as comprehension flooded her features. She nodded her head, getting to her feet as her body glimmered and morphed into the form of a silver bird, perching neatly on the back of the chair.

“Would you look at that.” Hiroshi murmured, shaking his head slowly. “If I could do that, I’d be able to hide from my college roommate whenever he wants to test out his latest martial arts move.”

“That’s amazing.” Sakura was equally struck. “How do you do that? I mean, change so easily? If I didn’t know you weren’t a bird, I’d think you flew in from outside.”

“I get it.” Tenchi frowned, casting Washu a troubled look, as Yume shifted her form back to her more familiar Earth disguise. “Washu, you think a shape-shifter might have been the bird that Misao and Jiro were talking about.”

“It’s a good way to protect an identity, that’s for sure.” Washu nodded her head. “Thank you for the demonstration, Yume. Perfect, as usual.”

“So can you change yourself into anything you like, Miss Yume?” Misao asked her curiously. Yume nodded her head.

“So long as it’s in my databanks, yes.” She agreed. “That’s what I was designed to do — to change my form and blend in with the people around me. Even this form you see me in now is not how I truly appear — Yume is my Earth disguise, that’s all.”

“So how do you really look, then?” Sakura asked. “I mean, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“Zero is a robot, so I look like a robot.” Yume said simply. “But Yume is who I’ve become, so I choose to live in this form, not as the robot I was built to be. I don’t like remembering that life, you see — bad things happened in it, and they’re not things I want to go back to. Becoming Yume was a new start for me — so this is how I like to look, most of the time.”

“My brain hurts.” Hiroshi admitted.

“We’re getting off the point again.” Ryoko said impatiently. “So a shape-shifter is working with Haki in some way. Is that what we think,

then? That somehow this shape-shifter was involved in his release, and that this has something to do with Misao being nabbed and the fact he left her where he did?”

“I suppose it’s possible he left her there for *you* to find, Ryoko.” Tenchi said, eying his fiancée anxiously. “Considering this man’s feeling towards you, it could have been meant as a trap.”

“I’m not here to hurt anyone!” Misao looked frightened, holding up her hands in a gesture of submission. “I promise, I’ve not lied to you! I didn’t come here to do anything bad, and I... I don’t know anything about this Haki person that I haven’t told you!”

“Nobody is suggesting that, Misao-chan. Relax.” Washu said gently, offering her a smile. “And I don’t think Tenchi meant to imply that you were complicit. Maybe Haki hoped to encounter Ryoko, or draw him after her into space after he left you as bait. As it happened, Ryoko had the sense not to follow, so if that was his plan, it failed. And now we can see about getting you home, so you really have nothing to worry about.”

“You should probably get some rest.” Yume added. “Will you come with me, Misao? I can find you something clean and fresh to sleep in, and you must be tired, after your ordeal. It’s quite safe here — noone will let any harm come to you.”

“Thank you. I... I am tired.” Misao nodded her head. “I will come with you, Miss Yume, if I’m not being any trouble.”

“Where will you take her?” Washu asked. “I’d rather not have her in the lab if at all possible — there are a lot of things there she could trip and fall over, and I don’t want her doing herself an injury.”

Ryoko sighed, resignation entering her eyes.

“She can sleep in my room, Yume.” She said flatly. “After all, I don’t sleep there most nights, and if it gets cold out, I can always invade Tenchi’s room.”

“Then that’s settled.” Washu looked pleased, as Tenchi reddened at his fiancée’s casual innuendo. “Good girl, Ryoko.”

“Thanks, *Mom*.” Ryoko muttered, as Yume led the young girl away, the door sliding shut behind them. “It’s not like there’s anywhere else she can sleep. Sakura and Hiroshi are here too, and we don’t have any spare room space. I’m the only one who’s happy sleeping on the roof or the shrine gateway if it’s summer, so it makes sense. And it’s not like you wouldn’t have made me, if I hadn’t offered. I figured I’d save myself the fight.”

“Sleep... on the roof?” Hiroshi blinked, and Tenchi shot Ryoko a rueful smile.

“We have a few, shall we say, unique living arrangements in this house.” He admitted. “Ryoko’s fairly game to sleep anywhere — actually, her bedroom seems to be bottom of her list of preferences.”

“Not high enough up.” Ryoko explained succinctly. “I’m a pirate, I’m used to taking high ground. Besides, when you can fly, falling doesn’t really hold much fear. It’s nicer, sleeping under the stars when there’s a clear sky like there often is on the Earth. I like to enjoy what’s around me, that’s all.”

“I’m sure you do.” Hiroshi murmured ambiguously, sending Tenchi a meaningful look, and Tenchi reddened further, casting his friend a glare.

“Will you cut it out?” He demanded. “This isn’t the time or the place, you know.”

“What about the girl, Washu? Is she really telling the truth, do you think?” Ryoko shot the scientist a glance, and Washu frowned, nodding her head.

“To my eyes she looks just what she seems. A scared young girl who’s been through a traumatic time and who is lonely, homesick and lost.” She said with a shrug. “If you’re thinking of Sakuya Kumashiro and Yugi’s web of deceit, Ryoko, I think you can lay that fear to rest. Misao is just what she claims... a kidnapped girl who’s lucky to have escaped Haki with her life.”

“Well, that’s a relief, at least.” Tenchi said pensively. “Do you think you can get in touch with Yousai then, Washu? I mean, to tell them that their lost Lady is safe and sound with us?”

“I’ll work on doing that first thing in the morning. For now, I suggest we all get some rest.” Washu said wisely. “It would be better for Misao to sleep the night through than be disturbed in the middle of it by well-meaning envoys from a planet several light years from here. Besides, I will have to notify Earth’s authorities that we’re expecting peaceful visitors. They’re still a bit jittery about the appearance of Haki’s ship on their scanners, so it might be wise to give them prior warning of this visit. They’re used to Ryo Ohki flitting in and out, and royal ships from Jurai have been known to cross the threshold, too. But Haki’s Karasu is an entirely different matter — they were understandably a bit alarmed.”

“Then we’ll go to bed, I guess.” Ryoko frowned. “And see what

happens in the morning. There's still something wrong about all of this though, somehow. I can't put it together, but it seems wrong to me. Doesn't it seem that way to you?"

"Like pieces of a jigsaw that have been tossed all over the floor?" Washu nodded. "Yes. Just like that."

"We'll have to try and put it back together, then." Tenchi said decidedly, getting to his feet and stifling a yawn. "Starting tomorrow, when we see what we can do about returning poor Misao to her anxious homeworld!"

# Chapter 11

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## Chapter Eleven

They'd all been gone such a long time.

Sasami sighed, resting her chin in her hands as she gazed out of the window of her chamber, her eyes scanning the horizon dutifully for any sign of Seiryō's returning silver craft. Without Kamidake's gentle company or Seiryō's sardonic wit, she felt oddly isolated in this strange land, and despite Azaka's kindness and Yurikage's zealous attentions, the sombre atmosphere that had pervaded Yousai since Misao's disappearance had begun to affect her too.

"We don't know each other very well yet, but I know she must be scared, Tsunami." She murmured softly, half-expecting her comment to go unanswered, but instead she felt a flicker of life stir within her, and she knew the Goddess had heard her words. "I know that Seiryō was the best person to go, with his Elite training, and that between them he and Kamidake are both strong and brave fighters. Since Washu healed the scars of Tokimi's magic, Seiryō's been as fit as he's ever been, and even Uncle acknowledges that he's one of the best soldiers Jurai has had in some time. But against a force like Haki — can they even stand a chance? If I knew Kamidake still had your magic beating within him, Tsunami, I'd feel more assured. But he doesn't — not now. They may be courageous but they're just ordinary men, going out there to face a resurrected demon with magic of his own. I don't like it at all. And I don't like thinking what might have happened to Misao."

A sound from the doorway startled her, and she turned, surprise flooding her expression as she registered the presence of the young page boy whom Daisuke had charged with chartering their carriage. He seemed equally discomfited by her sudden attention, pausing as if unsure what to do next, and despite her heavy heart, Sasami offered him a smile.

"Can I help you?"

"Lord Oshima sent me to find out if there's anything you need, Sasami-hime." The young boy gathered his wits, bowing his head in deference to her status. "He has charged me with attending to you."

"*Attending to me?*" Sasami was confused. "Is Lord Motonoya not



still nearby?"

"He has been called to speak to the remaining Council members, who are unsettled by recent events, my Lady." Rumiya told her soberly. "As a representative of Jurai, they seek his guidance and support at this time."

"I see." Sasami pursed her lips. "And Azaka?"

"Your Knight waits outside your door, Lady Sasami." Rumiya responded quietly. "To ensure your continued protection within these walls. But I have been charged by my Lord Oshima to make sure there is nothing you need in the meantime."

Sasami eyed her companion keenly, her gaze running fleetingly over the strange markings that decorated his young face.

"It's Rumiya, isn't it?" She asked gently. Rumiya looked surprised, then he nodded his head

"Yes, my Lady. That's right." He agreed. "My name is Rumiya."

"Lord Oshima said that you were a friend of Lady Misao's." Sasami eyed him pensively. "You must be worrying about her too — am I right?"

"Yes, My Lady." Rumiya's eyes clouded at this, and Sasami almost regretted her question as she saw the sadness deep within his expression. She frowned, coming across the room to where he stood.

"I'm sorry." She said softly. "I guess that's obvious, huh? It's difficult for life to go on when people you care about have gone far away and you don't know what's become of them."

"Your Knight and your advisor are gone to seek her, with Lord Hirayama." Rumiya said levelly. "I am told Lord Tennan is very strong, and Kamidake-san one of the bravest men to wear Juraian livery. I have faith they will bring her back."

"So do I." Sasami was startled by his words, then she smiled. "A lot of faith in them both. I'm glad you do too. I know that Seiryō won't give up easily — he's pretty stubborn, and he's clever, too. And Kamidake trained as a warrior from a young age, to fight against enemies worse than Haki. You're right, Rumiya. They'll all be fine, I know it. And Misao will come back to Yousai, because they need her and I have faith in her, too. She'll be all right — she has to be."

Rumiya eyed her curiously for a moment, and Sasami blushed under his scrutiny, glancing down at herself.

“What is it?” She asked, and Rumiya looked embarrassed.

“I’m sorry. It’s nothing.” He said hurriedly. “I just... I didn’t imagine that a Princess of Jurai would find time to speak to me, or share my concerns for Misao-sama. You’ve barely met, after all. You must be very kind, Sasami-hime, to care so much about the fate of a stranger.”

“Misao and I are friends of a sort, already.” Sasami dimpled. “That’s all.”

“Is there nothing I can get you, my Lady?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Sasami shook her head. “Everyone’s been so good to me and Lord Motonoya would never allow me to go hungry or thirsty if he thought that there was any chance of me being neglected. He’s very attentive to my every need, Rumiya — I don’t think I need anything at all, except to know my friends are safe.”

“Safe.” Rumiya frowned, glancing briefly out of the window towards the darkening Yousai skyline, and Sasami let out an exclamation, hand flying to her mouth as she caught sight of the reddish stain that had seeped across her companion’s attire. Rumiya started at her cry, wheeling around and jerking his injured arm as he did so, wincing as he jarred his injury. Despite his resolve, he felt his head begin to swim and he stumbled to his knees, putting his good hand out to steady himself as he fought to bring his surroundings back into clear focus.

“Rumiya, you’re hurt!” Sasami was at his side in an instant, placing gentle hands on his arm as trickles of red blood began to snake a trail across his skin. “Did this happen when the palace was attacked? Did Haki’s explosions do this to you?”

“Really, Lady Sasami, it’s nothing.” Rumiya pulled his arm away, shielding it with the other as he met her gaze with some difficulty. “It’s just a scratch — a flesh wound. Nothing for you to bother about, really. It’s not important.”

“Nonsense — you’re obviously hurting, and you almost fainted.” Sasami said frankly. “Don’t be silly. You’re just as bad as some of the men at court, when they’ve hurt themselves — why do you men always insist on ignoring it when you’re hurt? It could get infected and then be worse... let me see it, Rumiya. It’s bleeding, so you can’t tell me it’s nothing.”

“But... why would you care if I was bleeding or not?” Rumiya stared at her in confusion. “I don’t understand, Sasami-hime. I’m just a

serving boy — that's all."

"So that means you don't matter at all?" Sasami raised an eyebrow. "You matter to Misao, because Lord Oshima said you two were friends. And she'd want me to make sure you were all right, if she wasn't here to do it herself, wouldn't she?"

"I... I..."

"Sit still and let me see." Sasami made up her mind, holding the arm tightly in one hand as she pushed back Rumiya's sleeve. "There, you see? It's all messy and ugly. You need to wash it clean, you know, before you try and do any work with it. Either way, you can't leave it open like this. It'll get infected, and then where will you be?"

Rumiya stared at the Princess in bewildered silence, and Sasami put a hand to her head, pulling free the long, thick-banded pink ribbon that had held her silken waves haphazardly back from her face in a loose tail. Very carefully she wrapped it around Rumiya's injured arm, stemming the flow of blood as she tied it neatly in a knot at the back.

"I'm sorry it's pink. I know it's not a boy's colour." She said apologetically, as Rumiya stared blankly at his arm. "But it will stop it bleeding until you can clean it up."

"I can't take this from you." Sudden panic flared in Rumiya's eyes and Sasami looked confused, shaking her head.

"Of course you can. I have about a million more like it." She said with a careless shrug. "Don't worry about it — I don't need it back."

"But I..."

"Just go and take care of yourself, okay?" Sasami's eyes twinkled with mischief. "If you want to do something for me, do that."

Rumiya reached up to brush the ribbon with his fingers, a stricken expression on his face, and for a moment he seemed to be fighting internally with himself. Then, at length, he sighed, getting to his feet and bowing his head in the Princess's direction.

"Thank you, Sasami-hime." He said soberly. "I will do as you instruct me."

Then he was gone, and Sasami sighed, glancing at her fingers at the flecks of blood that now stained them.

"I guess it's hard for him, having lost his family and now he might lose Mi-chan, too." She murmured, as she made her way slowly across to the water-basin to rinse her skin clean. "I can't imagine being all

alone like that — poor Rumiya. And to think that noone even noticed he was hurt. I must remember to speak to Lord Oshima about that — to make sure that they take care of him as much as they take care of me. He's a person too, after all. They shouldn't expect him to run around after everyone else when he's not full strength."

Along the hallway from the Princess's room, Rumiya was also feeling anxious, but for quite different reasons. As he withdrew into an alcove, he cast a trepidant glance at the tight pink fabric that bound his arm, and his heart felt heavy in his chest.

"She's kind." He murmured. "Like Misao-sama. Why did she have to be a kind person? And when I'm going to betray her so badly, also! I wish she hadn't given me this ribbon — but what can I do about it now? Ramia-sama will already know that I have what she seeks, and if I defy her, she'll kill me before I have a chance to move an inch. I've seen what's in that box of hers — I know what she is capable of doing. But I wish I didn't have to... I wish I didn't have to hurt Princess Sasami."

He sighed, biting down on his lip as he hesitated. Then, shaking his head briefly to clear it, he set out across the yard towards his own quarters, mindful of the Princess's own words.

"I'll clean my wound and conceal it better, next time, in case someone makes a connection between it and Lord Motonoya's horrible sword." He muttered. "At least Lady Sasami thought I got hurt in Haki's attack, so I doubt she'll realise that I was the bird who was flying around her chamber looking for something to steal. I still don't know about that Motonoya, however... whether he attacked me because he's an idiot who attacks anything that moves near his Princess, or because he knew I was doing something that would hurt her, I don't know. I guess I have no choice but to mention that to Ramia-sama, also."

He grimaced, as a feeling of genuine regret washed over his senses.

"It's a twisted path and I have no way back." He realised. "My soul is Ramia-sama's and I cannot disobey her, even if I want to. So I won't... I'll do as she tells me. I just hope... I just hope that Sasami-hime's magic is strong enough to counter any dark spell Ramia-sama chooses to put over her!"

"So, what do you make of all of this?"

Sakura glanced up from where she had been sprawled on the grass beneath the shrine, a magazine spread out before her as she flicked idly through the pages. She cast a rueful smile up at her companion as he dropped down beside her, holding out a canned fizzy drink to her and she took it gratefully.

“Thanks, Ikeda. I was just thinking about walking back up to the house to get something to drink.”

“When Tenchi said you’d taken a walk out to the shrine, I figured you’d come here to think about what we’ve been dropped into.” Hiroshi settled himself more comfortably on the ground, eying her keenly, and Sakura nodded, flipping her magazine shut as she pulled herself into a more upright position.

“Something like that. Everything was getting a big manic, back at the house.” She reflected pensively, opening the can and taking a contemplative sip of the cool liquid. “I like Tenchi a whole lot, you know that. And Ryoko I can handle — in fact, her quirks seem almost normal now, considering how long we’ve known her. But there is a whole lot of oddness living in the Masaki family home, and I think I needed to just come up here and get my head around it. Between robots that change shape, spaceships that look like long eared rabbit cats and scientists who babble on about theories of universal existence, my brain was starting to implode.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Hiroshi rubbed his chin ruefully. “I feel the same way.”

“I suppose in a sense we should be honoured, though.” Sakura remarked. “I mean, Tenchi has trusted us with all of this. Even though the Earth hasn’t closed its doors to the alien thing since that Ayeka cousin of his tried to sell us on the idea, I think a lot of people would still freak out badly if they knew about a family like his. And the fact he lets us come here and all, it shows he trusts us to deal with it properly. So I’m trying to. Just with all this talk about a space pirate... it scares me a little to think that there’s a being in space that has more power than Ryoko to throw around.”

“Ryoko has too much of it as it is, if you think about it.” Hiroshi inclined his head in agreement. “I mean, she’s fairly Earth-trained, to give her her due, but I wouldn’t like to be on the receiving end of her temper. How Tenchi manages in a fight is beyond me... I’d be scared to ever contradict the woman, to be honest with you.”

“But Ryoko says Tenchi is even stronger than she is.” Sakura sighed, resting her chin in her hands as she rolled back onto her front.

“So I guess he’s not scared of anything she can throw at him.”

“Did you believe that? I thought she was winding us up.” Hiroshi looked startled. Sakura eyed him dryly.

“You also thought Ryoko was pregnant and that this was a whole cover-up to hide that fact.” She reminded him. “Yes, Ikeda, I believe her. So far everything else has panned out — right to having that strange little girl turn up.”

“That’s just it, though. She’s not that strange looking.” Hiroshi frowned. “She looks just like a normal Earth girl. I think that’s what weirds me out a little about the alien thing. They do look a lot like us. Take Tenchi’s grandpa, for instance. The shrine priest. Would you ever guess he was born in outer space?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Sakura agreed. “And Ryoko is the same. Okay, her hair is a bit crazy, and if you really pay attention, you can see her ears aren’t quite like yours or mine. But on balance, she blends in fairly well. It makes you wonder how many others there already are on the Earth, to be truthful. You could almost become paranoid, looking for extra-terrestrials in every day society.”

“I never looked at Ryoko’s ears before.” Hiroshi looked startled. “What’s wrong with them? She looks like a normal woman to me.”

“Yeah, and I can guess where you were looking to form that conclusion.” Sakura said wryly. “Just trust me, Hiroshi-kun. They’re not quite the same as Earth ears.”

Hiroshi pulled a face at her.

“You think that girls are all I think about.” He objected. “And that I only ever talk to a girl with a view to sizing her up and checking her out. Well you’re wrong, Ito-san. I can have a perfectly normal, natural conversation with a girl without involving sexual innuendo. You should know that. You’re a girl. And we talk about a lot of things. I don’t spend all my time gawking at you, do I?”

“No, you don’t.” Sakura shook her head. “But that wasn’t exactly my point.”

“So what was?”

“Never mind.” Sakura said frankly, shrugging her shoulders dismissively. She paused for a moment, then, “Although I’m amazed that you even have noticed that I’m a girl, considering how stupid you are sometimes.”

“Which means what, exactly?” Hiroshi stared at her. Sakura

shrugged.

“Nothing at all.” She said simply. “Just that you’re way too fixated with the way people look, is all.”

“Sakura, is this another of your weird girlish moments?” Hiroshi eyed her quizzically, confusion in his dark eyes. “Are you hormonal or something? Because you drive me nuts when you get like this. Why do you think I don’t spend a lot of time making friends with girls? You’re all half nuts.”

“Look who’s talking!” Sakura exclaimed. “At least I don’t want to speed through space on a hunt for some impossibly cute guy!”

“Sometimes I really don’t get you.” Hiroshi sighed, shaking his head slowly. “You open your mouth, I hear the words, but they might as well be in gibberish for all I understand them. What is wrong with you, Sakura? One minute you’re fine and the next you’re flipping out at me. What gives already?”

“Like you’d ever say anything that would get to me.” Sakura snorted. “I’m just pointing out what a moron you can be. That’s all.”

“And I’d just like to know what I did to deserve this little tirade!” Hiroshi objected. “Trust a woman to yell at a man without telling him why she’s ticked in the first place!”

“Before Sakura could retort, there was a sudden rush of air across the shrine complex, blowing through the trees and causing the branches to bend and rustle violently in the backdraft. As a shadow began to creep across the land, the two Earthlings forgot their dispute in an instant, raising their gaze to the skies as one person as the distinctive silver sheen of a spacecraft cut through the clouds, hovering almost directly over the shrine complex.

Sakura’s eyes widened with disbelief, and she grabbed Hiroshi by the arm.

“It’s that ship again!” She exclaimed, scrambling to her feet and pulling him up with her, almost knocking off his glasses as she did so. “Don’t you recognise it? It’s that spaceship! The silver spaceship!”

“What silver spaceship? What are you babbling about now?” Hiroshi demanded, straightening his specs and squinting up towards the vast contraption as it drew to a steady halt. “Given what’s been going on, it’s not the black ship that Ryoko was panicking about, so it’s probably not anything we should worry about. Spaceships come in and out of this area all the time, if you believe that Washu woman... this is probably the people from that girl’s planet, coming to take her

home.”

“No, Hiroshi, I’ve seen this ship before.” Sakura swallowed hard, a shiver running down her spine as she saw the craft’s hatch beginning to open. “In Osaka. When the... the night club...”

She got no further, but her meaning was not lost on her companion and he muttered a curse, taking a step backwards as a glimmering light shone down on the ground mere feet from where they stood.

“You mean the jerk who wasted the place?” He asked fearfully. “That Tennan guy, who Ryoko fought?”

Sakura nodded, finding words beyond her as a figure became visible through the glow of the ray, growing more vivid with every passing second as he stepped forward, out of the light. As his features became clear she let out a shriek, her eyes becoming big with fear as she recognised him.

“Seiryō Tennan!” She whispered. “I was right!”

Seiryō stopped dead in his tracks at the sound of his name, eying her with some confusion, and in the awkward silence that followed, Hiroshi stepped neatly between them, pushing Sakura back out of the way.

“You go back to wherever you came from. You’re not welcome here!” He said firmly, though Sakura could tell that her would-be protector was just as scared as she was. “I mean it! Get back in your spaceship or we’ll get Ryoko to come blast you into the sky again!”

Seiryō blinked, his gaze flitting from one earthling to the other as he tried to work out who they were. He frowned, his brows drawing together in confusion.

“Have we met before?” He asked softly. This was too much for Sakura, who darted out from behind Hiroshi’s body, glaring at him in indignation.

“How dare you think we’re that stupid!” She exclaimed. “You were the lowlife who set fire to that nightclub and who ordered your companions to kill us all if we tried to escape! Don’t pretend that you don’t remember — you may be dressed differently but don’t think you can fool us just because we’re Earthlings! We know what you are and we’re not going to let you get any closer to Tenchi this time than you did then. Do you understand? Go back to where you came from, or you’ll be sorry you ever bothered this planet!”

Seiryō eyed her for a moment, then he sighed.



“How tiresome.” He observed. “I did hope that I’d manage to avoid the native population on this visit, but still, such is life.”

“There seems to be a large amount of noise out here, considering that this is a shrine and a place of contemplation.”

At that moment the voice of the old shrine priest interrupted the uncomfortable atmosphere, and Sakura’s heart swelled with relief at the sound of their companion’s approach. Dimly she remembered Tenchi telling her something about a power that the old man possessed, and she darted towards him, grabbing him by the arm.

“Katsuhito-san, this is the man who attacked us in Osaka, and burned the nightclub to the ground.” She said anxiously. “He’s come to cause us trouble again... we have to stop him getting to Tenchi!”

“Sakura’s right.” Hiroshi added his bit. “He’s dangerous and we can’t trust him!”

Katsuhito’s gaze rested briefly on Seiryō’s face, which was becoming more and more impatient by the minute.

“Yoshō-dono, would you please tell these hysterical monkeys that I’m not here to do anything of the sort?” He asked wearily. “You at least must be aware of the facts of the incident, even if they are not.”

“Hysterical... *what* did you call us?” Rage flared in Sakura’s heart at this, and she dove towards the nobleman in her fury, but Seiryō took a step back away from her, folding his arms across his chest.

“Monkeys.” He said evenly. “I speak as I find. If you don’t want to be insulted, stop behaving like heathens and let me speak.”

“Seiryō-dono, this is an unexpected surprise.” Katsuhito inclined his head slightly to acknowledge the nobleman, paying no attention to Hiroshi’s confusion or Sakura’s anger as he stepped forward, holding up his hands in a peculiar Juraian greeting. “But even you must be aware that there are some places which should not be disturbed — not even by the noble council of Jurai.”

“Katsuhito-san...” Sakura gazed at the old man in dismay, and Katsuhito offered her a gentle smile.

“Lord Tennen is a vassal of the Juraian Emperor, my Father, Lord Azusa.” He said lightly. “And the crest he wears alongside his own is that of the Lady Sasami, sister to the Crown Princess of that planet. I don’t think he’s come here to cause harm... not if he is doing Sasami-sama’s bidding.”

“At last, someone who speaks some sense!” Seiryō’s eyes flickered

with relief. “And you’re right, as it happens. I am here on Lady Sasami’s business — in a vague manner of speaking. Actually, I’ve come from Yousai — and I was hoping to speak to Lady Ryoko and Lord Tenchi.”

“I don’t care what he says, I know he was that Police agent who attacked our planet and wanted to hurt Tenchi.” Sakura muttered. “I don’t forget faces that easily! He may have people fooled, but he doesn’t fool me.”

“Lord Tennan was placed under a dark spell when those events occurred.” Katsuhito said calmly. “He was not acting under his own will, and the spell has since been broken. I’m sure that he means you no more harm than I do, Miss Ito.”

“A... spell?” Sakura looked startled, and Seiryō bowed his head in her direction.

“I did many things under Kihaku’s lure that I am not proud of.” He said quietly. “I am not here to hurt Lord Tenchi or cause harm to your planet. I merely seek his and Lady Ryoko’s advice on something, that is all. Whatever happened in the past, that is not my errand now.”

“So you’re saying that he was someone’s puppet, when he did those things?” Hiroshi’s eyes widened in alarm. “There’s someone that nuts in the universe, who’d make a guy go attack a random city nightclub just for kicks?”

“Lord Tennan, you are alone on this mission?” Katsuhito eyed his companion quizzically, and Seiryō shook his head.

“No. Kamidake is with me, and a representative from Yousai.” He replied. “But space travel doesn’t seem to agree with my Lord representative of their council, and he has chosen to remain aboard the Unko rather than descend to the Earth.”

“And Kamidake?”

“Kamidake has elected to remain with him, ostensibly in case he is needed.” Seiryō’s expression became rueful. “In truth, he’s simply not speaking to me — I think I may have said something on our voyage which quite offended him.”

“I can imagine that’s true.” Sakura murmured, eying the nobleman darkly. “So you’re really not a bad guy, then? I mean, honestly and truly?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m an angel, but I’m certainly not the demon you imagine me to be, Miss.” Seiryō agreed evenly.

“Then why call us monkeys, if that’s the case?”

“You screeched at me like primates. What else was I supposed to think?” Seiryō arched an eyebrow. “I don’t pretend to like the Earth very much, and my visits here in the past haven’t exactly endeared me to its people. You’ll forgive me if I don’t understand your mode of address — whether you have connections to Jurai or not, you still rank as a primitive planet in most people’s space almanacs.”

“Now now, Seiryō-sama, that is harsh.” Katsuhito said chidingly. “Sakura-san and Hiroshi-san only sought to defend their world from what they perceived was an attack. You shouldn’t be so sweeping or so antagonistic towards them... they only act in the same way as you would, if something attacked Jurai and your family back there.”

Seiryō looked startled, then he offered a slight, chastened smile.

“Yes, you’re right.” He acknowledged. “I’m sorry — I think this journey has made me bad-tempered and surly. My apologies to you both... I have no right to judge your planet, when I know so little of its ways.”

Sakura sent the nobleman a wary look, then,

“What do you want with Tenchi?” She asked softly. “Last time you came here, you came to hurt him. That might have been a bad spell, or it might not. I don’t know enough about those things to tell. But I do know that Tenchi is my friend. If you didn’t come here to hurt him, then you can leave your weapon with Katsuhito-san, here at the shrine. Otherwise there’s no way we’re going to let you anywhere near the Masaki house.”

Seiryō stared at her for a moment. Then a wry smile touched his lips, and he bowed his head in her direction, as if to acknowledge her train of thought.

“It seems that I have underestimated your people far more than I thought.” He said softly, sliding his hand around the hilt of his blade and pulling it from its scabbard. He glanced at it for a moment, then held it out to the shrine priest, who took it without comment. “There. Are you satisfied? Whatever I may or may not have done when I attacked the Earth in the past, I don’t have any magic to wield against you or against Lord Tenchi... and even if I did, that Prince is possessed with greater spiritual magic than most citizens of my planet. I doubt there’s much I could do to harm him, if it came to it.”

Sakura cast a questioning look at Katsuhito for confirmation, and the old man nodded.

“The Tennen family have no natural magic. They are not related to the Royal Tree, and aren’t blessed with Tsunami’s power.” He agreed quietly. “Lord Tennen tells you the truth.”

“Your caution does you credit, Miss.” Seiryō added. “I retract my earlier statement about heathens and primitive peoples. I suppose that I assumed that technological deficit must mean a mental one, as well... but perhaps I was wrong.”

“Stop trying to flatter her.” Hiroshi’s brows drew together suspiciously. “If you want to see Tenchi and Ryoko, come with us — but don’t think we’re easily sweet-talked. People on this planet have long memories, you know.”

Seiryō raised his eyebrows in amusement, but he made no comment, merely falling into step with the two Earthlings as they turned back towards the Masaki house. For a while they walked in silence, then Sakura cast their companion a sidelong glance.

“So you really come from Jurai, then? Like Katsuhito-san and Tenchi’s relatives?” She asked softly. Seiryō nodded.

“Yes. As Lord Yosho said, I am a Vassal of the Emperor Azusa and a member of his Council.” He agreed evenly.

“Why do you call him Yosho?” Hiroshi frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Because that is his name.”

“But...”

“On Jurai, he was born Yosho Kamiki Jurai.” Seiryō said simply. “And such he remains to our people, even though here he adopts the name Katsuhito Masaki, to live among you in secret. Since you know the truth of his origins, then clearly the Masaki family have placed great trust in you. But my lord Azusa still calls his son by his proper name, and as a result, so do we.”

“Yosho, huh.” Sakura pursed her lips. “I suppose I never thought about it — that he might have changed his name. Is Tenchi really Tenchi, then? Or something else?”

“As far as I know, miss, Lord Tenchi is and always has been Tenchi Masaki Jurai.” Seiryō shrugged his shoulders. “But we are not what I would call intimate acquaintances. I suspect you know him far more than I do — our encounters have been fleeting and not always pleasant, in the past.”

“Masaki... Jurai?” Hiroshi pursed his lips. “As in, from Jurai?”

“As in ‘Of the Royal Family of Jurai.’” Seiryō replied levelly. “But then I trust that you already know that much.”

“Yes.” Sakura agreed. “Although it’s not something we spend a lot of time thinking about, when we’re running for classes or fighting over books in the college library. Tenchi might be a Prince by blood, but that’s the only way. He’s just a regular guy, otherwise. That’s all.”

Seiryō was silent for a moment, as if debating how best to phrase his next statement. At length he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“On a world such as this, I imagine you’ve had no cause to see your friend’s true nature.” He said finally. “I think you underestimate him.”

“Not at all.” Hiroshi shook his head. “Sakura’s right — and she meant it as a good thing. Tenchi’s one of the gang — one of us. And even if he is some Prince on an alien planet, when he goes there — he’s Tenchi Masaki when he’s here with us. That’s just how it is.”

“I won’t pretend I understand.” Seiryō observed. “But I’ll take your word for it. Much about this planet eludes me... I suppose that is just another of those things that I can’t interpret.”

At that moment they reached the clearing that lead down to the house, and the nobleman paused, casting a thoughtful gaze over the house. Sakura bristled, preparing to defend the ordinary looking building from another of Seiryō’s sardonic remarks, but to her surprise, the man smiled.

“The valley is very beautiful.” He said softly. “And I know someone who would like very much to spend time here, picking the wild flowers.”

“*Seiryō?*” Before either of his escorts could respond, Washu materialised on the front lawn, surprise and pleasure flooding her features as she grasped the man’s hand warmly in hers. “I *thought* I picked up a ship’s signal, over the shrine! What brings the Unko here? I didn’t think that Earth was high on your list of travel locations — is something wrong?”

An anxious look touched her expression for a moment.

“Is it Tokimi?” She added softly. “Is something... has something happened?”

“To Tokimi?” Seiryō looked startled, then he shook his head. “No, Washu. I can tell you that when I left her and my sister, both were quite well. Tokimi has settled and blossomed very nicely, and she relished the chance to celebrate her first Startica, helping with some

of the floral displays and having the time of her life. You needn't have concerns for your sister's well-being."

"Then why are you here?" Washu eyed him quizzically. "Don't tell me that this has something to do with a space pirate and a broken sub-space seal?"

"Rather closer to the mark, yes." Seiryō said gravely. "And I'm glad you're here to consult, although it's really Lady Ryoko's brain I need to pick, if I can. The pirate, Haki, attacked Yousai some days ago, and took a hostage... a little girl. I was with Lady Sasami on this planet at the time, and Kamidake and I volunteered to give chase, but we've no leads and no way of tracking the man down. Lady Misao is only thirteen, and quite timid even for that age... we are fearful for her safety. I hoped Ryoko might have some leads on the pirate and his haunts that we might investigate."

"But Misao is the name of the girl Ryoko brought back with her, isn't it?" Sakura looked startled. "The child she found on the space station?"

"Sakura's right." Hiroshi nodded. "I'm sure that was the girl's name."

"It was." Washu confirmed. "Seiryō, you needn't follow Haki's trail any longer. It seems that for whatever reason he lost interest in the child and dumped her somewhere in the depths of space. I won't pretend to know where, and I doubt that Ryoko will betray the location, given her pirate's sense of honour. But the short of it is that the child is here with us, safe on the Earth. An old friend of Ryoko's found her and asked her to take care of the girl, so Ryoko brought her back to the Earth. I've been trying to establish a signal to send Yousai a message, but I've been unable to make contact so far."

"I think that the communications system was probably damaged in Haki's raid." Relief flickered in Seiryō's malachite eyes. "But if Lady Misao is here, then that's all we seek. It was a good idea, coming here. I didn't imagine we'd find the girl in your company, but I should have known you'd have more information than we do about Haki and his movements already."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to see you, and even happier to be able to go home." Washu said pensively. "She's had a shaky day or two, I think — the poor girl was very scared when Ryoko first brought her back, and well, I wouldn't say my daughter was a natural with children. Come inside, Seiryō — you must be tired after your trip, and Sakura or Hiroshi can go find Misao, I'm sure."

“I’ll go.” Hiroshi volunteered, casting a final, wary look at the nobleman. “I won’t be long.”

With that he was gone into the house, and Washu cast Seiryō a grin.

“It’s nothing elaborate, and certainly nothing like the Tennan estate.” She said flippantly. “But it serves its purpose.”

“The view is very beautiful.” Seiryō said contemplatively. “I was imagining what Tokimi would make of the mountains and the fields. I’m surprised you didn’t bring her here, Washu. I don’t see that she would have lacked for anything, in this environment.”

“I think Tokimi is where she should be.” Washu replied quietly, and Sakura saw a look pass between the two that told of an unspoken shared knowledge. “Besides, she’s attached to you and to Suki, now. I wouldn’t drag her away from a place that has become her home... or from people she considers close family. Tokimi needs you both more than she needs me, I think — much as I love my sister, I know my shortcomings. Suki has more patience than I ever will have, and we’d only fight. Plus, Ryoko and Tokimi haven’t quite made their peace, yet. And a mother has to choose to follow her daughter, when it comes to the crunch. So long as she isn’t a burden to you, Seiryō, I’d like Tokimi to remain on Jurai.”

“I see.” Seiryō’s expression softened, and with a jolt of surprise, Sakura saw genuine compassion touch his features, easing the sharpness of his gaze and making him appear less forbidding in a moment. “Yes, I understand. And Tokimi will never be a burden to us, Washu. We like having her. She’s good for us both — me in particular, I think.”

“Then that’s settled.” Washu dimpled, the moment of gravity gone. “Sakura-chan, do you feel like making tea, or shall I yell for Yume?”

“I... I guess I can make tea.” Sakura started, gathering her composure as she realised she had been staring. “No problem.”

She headed into the kitchen, closing the sliding door behind her with a sigh as she glanced around her for the mugs, pulling open the cupboards above her head as she searched for the things she needed.

“If you’re making tea, Sakura-chan, count me in.”

Ryoko’s voice from behind her startled her and she gasped, swinging around to face the pirate accusingly.

“You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry.” Ryoko shrugged, mischief in her eyes. “Why so jumpy, anyhow?”

“Where’s Tenchi? Is he not here?” Sakura frowned. “He’s not at the shrine — is he not at the house, either?”

“He’s in his room. Studying.” Ryoko pulled a face. “I got bored, so I thought I’d come see what everyone else was doing. How he concentrates at a time like this, I don’t know — but that’s Tenchi for you.”

“There’s an alien in the front room, Ryoko.” Sakura grabbed her by the arms, and Ryoko looked confused.

“There’s one standing right here, if you’d forgotten.” She said at length. “And this house is fairly open season on aliens, you know. What’s so scary about this one?”

“It’s Seiryō Tennan. The guy who blew to bits that club in Osaka.”

“Seiryō...?” Ryoko’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “What the hell is *he* doing here?”

“Looking for Misao, it seems. He’s come to find her and take her home... at least, Washu-san seems to believe him, when he says that’s what he’s doing here.” Sakura bit her lip. “Can we trust him, Ryoko? Your mother seems to think we can — she greeted him like an old friend. But I’d rather have your word on this — I know that you were there, that night in the club.”

“Well, I don’t pretend I like him, but I don’t think he’s a threat.” Ryoko sighed. “The last time I was on Jurai, he was definitely on our side. He did some pretty bad things here and to people I care about, but everyone’s put that down to dark Kii magic... so I guess it’s all right. I don’t know that I like him in our house, though. That’s a bit too close for comfort, even if all has been forgiven and forgotten. And why is he looking for Misao? What has he to do with Yousai?”

“Katsuhito-san said that it had to do with... someone called Sasami.” Sakura struggled to remember. “And that the symbol he wore on his clothing alongside his own was her symbol. He said Seiryō-sama was a vassal of the Juraian Emperor.”

“Sasami?” Ryoko’s brows knitted together. “I see. That’s a new and slightly odd development. I didn’t know Sasami had her own people, let alone that she’d chosen him as one of them.”

“But she’s a good guy, right? I mean, Sasami isn’t a bad person?”

“No, Sasami is definitely a friend.” Ryoko assured her. “And if he’s



acting on her instruction now, we can probably trust him. I guess. Sasami was on Yousai, we know that. Probably he was too, and that's why he's come."

"Then it's all all right? To trust him, I mean?" Sakura looked hesitant. "It's just that that poor girl was so scared, and if it wasn't all right..."

"He came alone?"

"No. He said someone called... Kamidake? Came with him. But he stayed on the ship for some reason or other. The ugly great craft is hanging over the shrine like a stormcloud right at the moment, but I wouldn't bring him to the house till he gave his weapon to Tenchi's grandfather. So he isn't armed... I made sure of that."

"I bet he loved that." Ryoko smirked. "Nice thinking. And if Kamidake is along, then it's all above board. Kamidake is Sasami's divinely appointed guardian — or one of them. I guess we'd better find Misao, then. The brat can go home, and we can stop babysitting her... that suits me fine. We've enough on our minds already, with Haki running riot around the universe."

"Washu-san sent Hiroshi to find her." Sakura turned her attention back to the tea. "And asked me to make drinks."

As they made their way through to the salon, Sakura clutching a tray of hot tea in her hands, Seiryō glanced up from his seat, meeting Ryoko's cautious gaze with an impassive one of his own.

"Hello, Lady Ryoko." He said quietly. "I understand you've found a lost stray, and I've come to take her home."

"So Sakura's told me." Ryoko dropped onto the couch, scooping up one of the mugs of tea and taking a sip. "Though I'm amazed you came all this way. Are you really working for Sasami now? I mean, on an official basis? Because that's just weird, if you are... I can't imagine what Lord Haru thinks of that connection."

"He hasn't really had much to do with it." Seiryō said simply. "And as you can see, I wear her crest with mine. It was her choice, and my Lord Emperor gave his approval. So here we are. Sasami-sama was with Lady Misao on Yousai, and is anxious about her safety. That's why I came."

"You made a lucky guess, in fact, and hit on coming here."

"Well, we came to ask you about Haki." Seiryō admitted, a slight smile touching his lips. "But if the girl is here, even better. I'm not

anxious to chase down a pirate who has the power to resurrect himself. I might be tempted to kill him, and from what I understand, that would only give him more power when he re-awoke again.”

“If you could get near enough to try.” Ryoko said darkly. “Smart choice. Haki isn’t someone you go after unless you have a death wish — or you really know what you’re doing. I’m serious. Keep away from him if you don’t want your family to be burying another lord in the next few weeks.”

“I’ll bear it in mind.” Seiryō said simply. He glanced at the tea, hesitating for a moment, then taking a cup, sipping it gingerly.

“It’s not poison.” Sakura objected. “I’m not trying to kill you, you know.”

“It tastes very good.” Seiryō acknowledged, offering her a smile. “I’m impressed... you might even rival my sister. It has a slightly different flavour from on Jurai, but I imagine that’s the natural plants from hereabouts... it’s not unpleasant at all.”

“Sakura makes good tea.” Washu reflected. “She and Yume put Ryoko and I to shame.”

Before Sakura could respond, the door of the salon slid back to reveal Hiroshi, a confused look on his face, and Tenchi not far behind him.

“What’s up, Ikeda?” Ryoko’s brows knitted together at his expression. “Something’s happened — what is it?”

“Nothing, I guess.” Hiroshi spread his hands. “I just can’t find the kid. She’s not in her room and Tenchi hasn’t seen her. She wasn’t out by the shrine... and she’s not here. I don’t know where else to look... it’s like she’s just, well vanished into thin air.”

## Chapter 12

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### Chapter Twelve

“Well, you took your time coming to me.”

Ramia sat back in her seat, eying her reluctant page with a mixture of impatience and amusement. “I was getting quite concerned about you, Rumiya... I wondered if perhaps you’d been careless enough to get found out.”

“I don’t think so, my Lady.” Rumiya frowned, shaking his head as his gaze drifted warily around the finely furnished prison chamber, pausing for a moment on the table which held Ramia’s carved box. His heart stilled in his chest for a moment as he saw that one of the figures had been laid out carefully beside it, and he bit his lip, knowing without going any closer whose likeness the doll was.

Ramia caught his gaze, humour glittering coldly in her marigold eyes.

“I was ready to take any precautions.” She said softly. “But you have not failed me, Rumiya — so you need not worry yourself. Not this time. I know you have what I seek. Give it to me, please.”

Rumiya swallowed hard, slipping his hand inside the folds of his jacket as he pulled out the creased, blood-stained ribbon, holding it hesitantly out to his mistress, who took it, eying it carefully.

“Your blood taints this cloth?” She asked evenly. Rumiya nodded his head.

“I’m afraid so, Lady Ramia.” He said hesitantly. “Lord Motonoya’s blade cut through my wing when I went originally to Lady Sasami’s chamber, and that’s why this took me so long. I had to withdraw and... and try again. She gave me the band to stem the flow of blood from my wound.”

“Compassion will be the death of that planet, Rumiya. Mark my words.” Ramia said pensively, turning the ribbon over in her hands. “She did not make the connection, I trust, between you and your bird likeness?”

“No, Lady Ramia.” Rumiya shook his head. “She thought I was hurt in Haki’s attack.”

"I see." Ramia seemed to be turning this over in her mind. "Well, tainted as it is, it will serve my purposes well enough. There are fine strands of Sasami-sama's hair still clinging to the fabric, so I will be able to cast my spell, even with your blood soiling it. I already hold you in my clutches, after all. It will make no difference."

"Ramia-sama, can you tell me something?" As Ramia wound the ribbon carefully around a newly crafted likeness, Rumiya plucked up his courage, eying his mistress in trepidation. "Did you... have you removed your protection from my bird form, now that I have returned from space?"

"Removed it?" Ramia's eyes narrowed. "No. As yet, I have not."

"Then do you know why it should be that Lord Motonoya's sword cut through my feathers so cleanly?" Rumiya's hand went absently to his stinging wound. "I don't understand how it happened, but he drew blood from me. The blood that soaked Lady Sasami's ribbon."

"Interesting." Ramia's eyes glittered thoughtfully. "Then his blade must be as I am — born of Airai. The magic I practice brings people to submission, but it is much harder to bewitch those of my native land. There is a type of metal drawn from the ore of Arian mountains and melted together to form swords... it is known to be extremely powerful metal, strong and decisive in the blows it makes. The stories say that the minerals exist to counteract the magic that fills Airai's people... and that contact with it can shatter minor spells. Perhaps Lord Motonoya possesses one such sword."

"Then he can kill me?" Rumiya looked apprehensive, and Ramia let out a low chuckle, shrugging her shoulders.

"Perhaps, if he thought you were in his way." She said lightly. "But I can kill you much more easily, so I wouldn't waste your time worrying about one of Princess Sasami's companions. Even if his blade is made of Arian steel, he has no idea of our true purpose here, and so long as you do as you are told, he won't be. In which case, he won't draw his sword on you again, now will he?"

"I suppose not." Rumiya sighed, twisting his hands together as he watched his companion lovingly fashion her doll. "Could this sword hurt even you, Lady Ramia?"

"That's a very dangerous question to ask someone who holds your soul in her hands, Rumiya." Ramia said softly, and Rumiya flinched back, shaking his head hurriedly.

"That's not what I meant." He said quickly. "I just... I was curious."

That's all."

"I think it's unlikely. I'm a very strong mage." Ramia pursed her lips together thoughtfully. "My people come from the mountain region, where swords such as this one are fashioned, and we have some resistance against the minerals' effects. If I was not sealed up in this evil place, my protection over your wings would not have been compromised. But I am not free yet, and so I have my limitations. That's all."

"That makes sense." Rumiya admitted. "I think I understand now."

"Good." Ramia offered him a dry smile, setting her new effigy down on the polished wood of the table, and running her fingers deftly over it as she gave it features. As Rumiya watched, he saw the creation's appearance shimmer and change, and he frowned, confused.

"I thought you were going to haunt Lady Sasami, Ramia-sama." He said uncertainly. "But that... that doesn't look like her."

"I have no interest in mere flesh and blood, Rumiya." Ramia dismissed his question with a careless flick of her hand. "I seek to bewitch something that runs deeply within her — something which shares her life and her genetics. You said yourself that Tsunami lives within that one, and that her magic was strong enough to drive Haki away from Tounochi. So it is Tsunami I must conquer. Sasami is simply a by-product of the Goddess's will, and she does not matter. Tsunami is the one who is strong, and the one who is in my way. So I will taint the Goddess, and the girl will soon die along with her."

Rumiya bit his lip, but he did not respond, and carefully Ramia set her figure to one side, flipping open the catch on her box and dipping her hand inside, looping her fingers around one of the other dolls and bringing it out into the light of the room.

"For now, however, I have another little test to perform." She murmured, and Rumiya's heart skipped a beat as he recognised the figurine that represented Misao. "Just to see how well you and Haki have served my purpose."

"You won't hurt her, will you?" Rumiya asked anxiously. Ramia laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

"No." She replied. "I have use for Misao, so she will not come to harm. However, she may cause it — I won't guarantee otherwise."

Rumiya swallowed hard, watching as the dark cloud of Ramia's red-gold magic engulfed the figure, light glinting from the hair as the delicate material absorbed the Lady's spell. For a moment, the doll

hovered out of Ramia's hands, then, very gently, it dropped down onto the table once more, the glow fading from its form. Ramia nodded her head in satisfaction.

"It is completed." She said softly. "And now to see just what my daughter is really made of."

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"How can she just have disappeared?"

Ryoko stared at Hiroshi blankly, a look of confusion on her face. "This is a strange planet for her — and she's scaredy enough for anything. She can't have gone far — last time I saw her, she was huddled up in my room and she didn't seem keen on straying. She's not exactly the adventurous type — where on Earth could she go?"

"Ryoko's right." Seiryō's expression became grave, his malachite eyes clouding as he contemplated Hiroshi's announcement. "Are you sure that you checked everywhere? Misao-sama is a gentle, reserved child by nature. I don't believe she would have wondered off to explore her surroundings."

"Not on her own, at least." Tenchi frowned.

"I'm pretty sure. I looked everywhere I could get to, and unless she can walk through walls, I can't see where else she could have gone." Hiroshi spread his hands, looking as non-plussed as the rest.

"I don't suppose she can walk through walls, Seiryō?" Washu asked the lord curiously. "I don't know much about the people of Yousai — not in magical terms. Is it possible that she might have that ability? My lab door is locked, but if she was able to phase..."

"Magic is not exactly my area of expertise, Washu. I wouldn't have a clue." Seiryō said frankly. "But I didn't get the impression that they did very much in that line, the Shizukasari. They seemed quite ineffectual, actually... I wouldn't have thought they were possessed of the kind of traits you and your daughter both have."

"Well, she has to be somewhere." Sakura said logically. "So Hiroshi must've missed her somehow — or he looked in one place that she moved to while he was checking somewhere else. Maybe if we all split up to look, we could find her more easily."

"Sakura's right." Ryoko acknowledged, a look of irritation in her amber eyes. "That is what we're going to have to do, if we're going to shift the Unko from dwarfing the shrine. I'm sure you don't want to stop here long, Seiryō-sama — and I'm pretty sure we don't want you

here more than you have to be. So I say we do as Sakura suggests. Split up. One of us is sure to come across her.”

“Sakura, are you and Ikeda game to help out?” Tenchi asked. Sakura nodded.

“Of course. The poor girl is scared and she wants to go home.” She said simply. “If it were me, I’d be freaking out, and she’s just a child. Why wouldn’t we help?”

“After all, how much trouble can one thirteen year old alien kid be?” Hiroshi added. “Sure, Masaki, count us in. The more eyes the better, and all that... though I swear, I’ve searched the place from top to bottom and I didn’t see any sign of her anywhere.”

“Maybe she saw the silver ship and got frightened by it.” Washu looked thoughtful. “If she’d already had a bad experience with Karasu, maybe she decided to hide when she saw it come down. Is she familiar with the Unko, Seiryō? Or would it be a strange ship to her?”

“I don’t think she saw us arrive on Yousai, so you probably have a good point.” Seiryō remarked pensively. “I doubt she would know that my ship was friend and not foe.”

“And if Kamidake came with you, perhaps he’s come down and already got a hold of her.” Tenchi added. “Maybe you should check your ship first of all, Lord Tennan. You don’t know this area all too well, so that seems to make sense. The rest of us can divide up between the house, the shrine and the surrounding land. If she’s here, we’ll find her quicker that way.”

“I’ll walk out to the shrine.” Sakura volunteered. “I know the way, and Katsuhito-san is there... he might have seen her, in the meantime.”

“I’ll fly over, see if I can see her from the sky.” Ryoko decided, flickering and blurring out of view before anyone could stop her, and Washu smiled wryly, shaking her head slowly at her daughter’s impatience.

“I suppose I’d better check out my lab, although I don’t expect she’s got in there.” She decided. “Which leaves the house and the mountainside for you and Ikeda-san, Tenchi.”

“I’d better take the house. I might get lost around the mountains.” Hiroshi scratched his head sheepishly. “I didn’t wander too far when I searched, I have to admit — all the pathways roundabout look the same to me.”

“Then I’ll head up that way and see if she’s wandered too far by herself.” Tenchi nodded. “We’ll meet back here in an hour, hopefully with Misao. Okay?”

“Sounds a good idea to me.” Sakura nodded decidedly. “All right. I’ll see you later.”

“And if you see Ryoko, tell her an hour.” Tenchi smiled.

Sakura grinned back at him, pushing back the sliding door and heading out into the hallway towards the front door. Behind her she could hear her companions heading off to their relevant locations, and as she stepped out into the bright Okayama sunlight, she realised that she was headed in the same direction as the arrogant alien that had accosted them at the shrine before. She paused, turning to glance at him, and he offered her a benign smile.

“Is something wrong?”

“I forgot you were parked over this way. That’s all.” Sakura frowned. “Ryoko says that we can probably trust you, but she doesn’t like you and I don’t, either. You think you’re better than us... I don’t like that.”

“The Juraian Empire is the strongest, longest lasting and most profitable Empire in the universe.” Seiryō said evenly, as they trudged out towards the old shrine complex. “The Earth, in comparison, is a sole planet which orbits its sun alone, devoid of neighbours with like populations with which to share communications and alliances. There is a big gap between the two of them.”

“Perhaps.” Sakura pursed her lips. “But that still doesn’t mean your way is better. Your planet seems to invite a lot of trouble, from what Tenchi and Ryoko have said about it.”

“I dare say that’s the truth.” Seiryō acknowledged. “People always seek to challenge great power structures, in the hopes of bringing them down and stealing their influence.”

“Will Jurai try and invade *this* planet, do you think? It’s invaded others, so I want to know.”

“Jurai? Invade the Earth? Not a chance of it.” Seiryō snorted. “For a start, there’s no benefit to be gained from patronising a planet such as this. Earth has no resources that Jurai might need, and pretty as it might be, the lifestyle is entirely foreign. Jurai seeks to aid Earth’s own defences because the Emperor’s son and great grandson both make their homes here, and because the Crown Princess and her sister are inordinately fond of these mountains. That’s all. There’s no



political agenda. Earth is not about to become Jurai's next colony... it would be financially unsound to even attempt it. As the Council's Treasurer, I can guarantee that I'd fight hard against funds being released for such a pointless mission."

"Financially unsound." Sakura echoed. "Fine. Good. That suits us, too. I'm glad we're not profitable enough for your people to come invade us."

"You're remarkably wary and suspicious, considering your friendship with Lord Tenchi." Seiryō remarked astutely. "You trust him and you trust his associates — but you still fear the greater motives of a world you don't understand?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Yes. I didn't say your wariness was a bad thing." Seiryō shook his head. "Caution is a wise survival tactic. I'm sure that's how your people have flourished here where other planets around you have failed to harbour life."

At that point they reached the shrine, and Seiryō ran his finger over a band on his wrist, gazing up towards the ship as a glimmering transport beam shot down onto the ground below.

"If you find Lady Misao, tell her we've come to take her home, not to harm her." He said simply, and then he was gone, drawn up with the dots of light into the belly of his craft. Sakura gazed at the spot where he had been for a brief moment, then up at the silvery contraption that still hung low in the sky.

"If I saw that, I'd probably never want to come out." She muttered, stepping in through the doorway of the shrine and peering her head around the wood-panel wall as she looked for the priest.

"Katsuhito-san, are you here? Can you tell me if you've seen the young girl Ryoko brought home with her last night?"

"The girl is missing, is she?" Katsuhito looked startled, glancing up from his desk. "I haven't seen her here, no. I've been busy with my work and have seen no one since you and your friend left with Lord Tennan."

"You still have his sword." Sakura realised, and Katsuhito nodded, holding it out to her.

"You can give it to him... likely I'll be wrapped up with things here all day and the sooner he moves his ship from my shrine the better for my custom." He said lightly. "I hope you find the girl soon — if she

appears here, I'll tell her you're looking."

"Thank you." Sakura eyed the sword hesitantly for a moment, then she took it gingerly in her grasp, gazing at the silent hilt blankly for a moment. "Is it meant to have a blade? I mean, I'm sure it did when that Tennen guy gave it to you. It isn't broken, is it?"

"No. Just sleeping." Katsuhito assured her. "It's tuned to recognise Seiryō's own genetic structure, you see — it won't form a blade for anyone else, so as it can't be used in battle against its master. It's quite safe for you to touch — you couldn't hurt yourself even if you wanted to."

"Oh." Relief flooded Sakura's soul and she slid the weapon into the pocket of her jeans. "Fine, then I'll make sure he gets it back before he leaves. Thanks for your help, Katsuhito-san — I need to go look for Misao now."

"Good luck." The old man offered her a smile, and she returned it, stepping neatly back outside the shrine as she gazed around at the surrounding country. As she did so, she thought she saw a flash of coloured fabric dart between the cherry trees that flanked the walkway between the shrine and the house, and she hurried forwards, taking the steps two at a time.

"Misao?" She called. "Misao, are you there? It's Sakura — Tenchi and Ryoko's friend. If you're there, come out and speak to me — someone's come to take you home!"

There was no answer, only the sound of wind rustling through the trees and Sakura frowned, pausing beneath the leafy green boughs as she gazed all around her for any sign of the missing girl.

"I know I saw something, or someone." She murmured. "But who... and where?"

She raised her gaze to the branches that, in spring time, bore her namesake flower petals, but there was no sign of a child there either, and she sighed, leaning against the trunk of the nearest one as she pondered things over.

"Misao?" She called again. "Misao, everyone's worrying about you!"

"And so they should be worried, letting poor little Misao disappear like that."

A voice came from the pathway behind her, a taunting, teasing note in her tones and Sakura swung around, gazing all around her for a

sign of the speaker.

“Look up, idiot. You won’t find me all the way down there.”

“Up?” Sakura frowned, doing as she was bidden, and letting out an exclamation as she saw the figure perched carefully on the edge of one of the sturdiest branches. “Hey, who are you? And where did you come from? There was noone there just a second ago!”

“Where indeed?” The girl’s eyes twinkled with mischief as she leapt deftly down from the tree, landing gracefully on the dirt in front of her companion. “Who can say? Here and there. There, mostly.”

Sakura frowned, taking in the stranger’s unfamiliar appearance with some amount of confusion. The girl that stood before her was not tall, and at first glance Sakura thought that she was probably little more than a child herself, although the humour that danced in her honey-coloured eyes suggested a wit and a spirit that outweighed her young years. Thick curls of hair, the colour of saffron flowed across her shoulders, a glittering silver band in the style of a mock coronet holding it back from her face. Her clothes were like nothing the young Earth student had ever seen. She was dressed all in black and purple, and Sakura could tell that her attire had been designed for ease and stealth of movement, but wisps of delicate gauzy fabric flitted in the breeze, adding a certain sophistication to her appearance.

As the silence threatened to become oppressive, the girl laughed, tut-tutting under her breath as she put her hands on her hips.

“It’s rude to stare, you know. Don’t they teach you things like that on this backwater planet?” She asked playfully. “Naughty, naughty. You should know better than that, at your age.”

“I’m sorry.” Sakura looked startled. “I just... who are you? Are you another friend of Tenchi’s? But... did you say you knew where Misao is? If you’ve seen her, we need to find her. Will you help?”

“Help?” The girl looked amused. “I wouldn’t say I’m exactly the helpful type, sweetie. But if you’re looking for Misao, I’ll give you some advice for free, just because you look pathetic enough to need it. Leave her alone — don’t keep looking for her. You’ll find yourself in trouble if you do — I don’t take kindly to people meddling in my affairs.”

Sakura’s eyes opened wide with alarm at this, and she stared at her companion with new eyes.

“You have Misao!” She whispered. “You’ve kidnapped her, haven’t you? Where is she? Why have you done this? Who are you, dammit —

answer me!”

“What are you going to do to me, if I don’t, Earthling?” The girl hopped idly from foot to foot, cocking her head on one side. “I know where Misao is, sure enough. But kidnap? Please. I don’t need to kidnap anyone to keep them away from idiots like you. You really don’t know anything, and that’s a shame. I’d hoped I’d at least find someone on this planet who’d be a little bit of fun to play with.”

“To... *play* with?” Sakura echoed, non-plussed. “Aren’t you a little too old to be playing games?”

“I guess you’ll just have to do.” The girl shrugged her shoulders, spreading her hands out in front of her and Sakura let out a gasp as glittering shards of light began to hover together around her foe’s fingers, bonding together into a bright silver blade that stretched down into a gleaming ebony hilt. As the light began to fade, Sakura saw that it was not a sword that the stranger held, but that the odd implement was more like a fan in its makeup, though it’s razor-sharp steel glinted in such a way that the Earthling knew making contact with it could cause her serious harm. A strange aura surrounded the girl, making her appear both sinister and ethereal as the light of the blade was reflected in her jewel-like eyes. Instinctively Sakura took a step back, but the hard trunk of the tree was behind her, and her opponent advanced, flexing her fingers as pieces of glittering star-shaped shrapnel shot out towards her, pinning her neatly in place.

“Your name is Sakura, isn’t it?” She said quietly, as she advanced on the frightened Earth girl. “And this is a sakura tree. I like that... don’t you? A good place to die, isn’t it, combining your blood with that of your namesake tree?”

“Why are you doing this?” Sakura whispered, struggling to quell the rising panic that shot up within her heart. “You’re making a mistake — someone will come looking for me and they’ll stop you! I swear that they will!”

“They might try.” The girl’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “But that’s okay by me. I like a challenge — a touch more excitement than a weakling like you. Even slitting your throat will be a disappointment to me, but I guess if it’s all I’ve got, I’ll do it anyway. You should have left Misao alone, you know, *Sa-ku-ra*. She’s none of your business, after all. You should have just turned your back.”

Sakura clenched her fists, closing her eyes as she waited for the flash of the girl’s mystical blade to wreak its way across her throat, slicing through her skin to the vessels and airways beneath. She could

feel the girl move closer, until she was aware of a faint whisper, like the wind, somewhere near her ear.

“My name is Misa.” The girl murmured, her tones all the more sinister for their lack of volume. “I’d say remember it... but there’s no point.”

Sakura flinched as something hot and prickly touched her throat, and there was the sound of amused, playful laughter.

“Smile, sweetie.” The voice teased, but there was a dark note in her tone. “The game’s over... and now you get to die.”